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Vol. 1 No. 3

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Helpless, Donal watched the embers of Terran civilisation grow dim—as one by one the women of the Zone changed and became oddly alien. . .

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COVER by LEWIS illustrating *Earth Shall Live Again.*

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# THE EDITOR'S SPACE

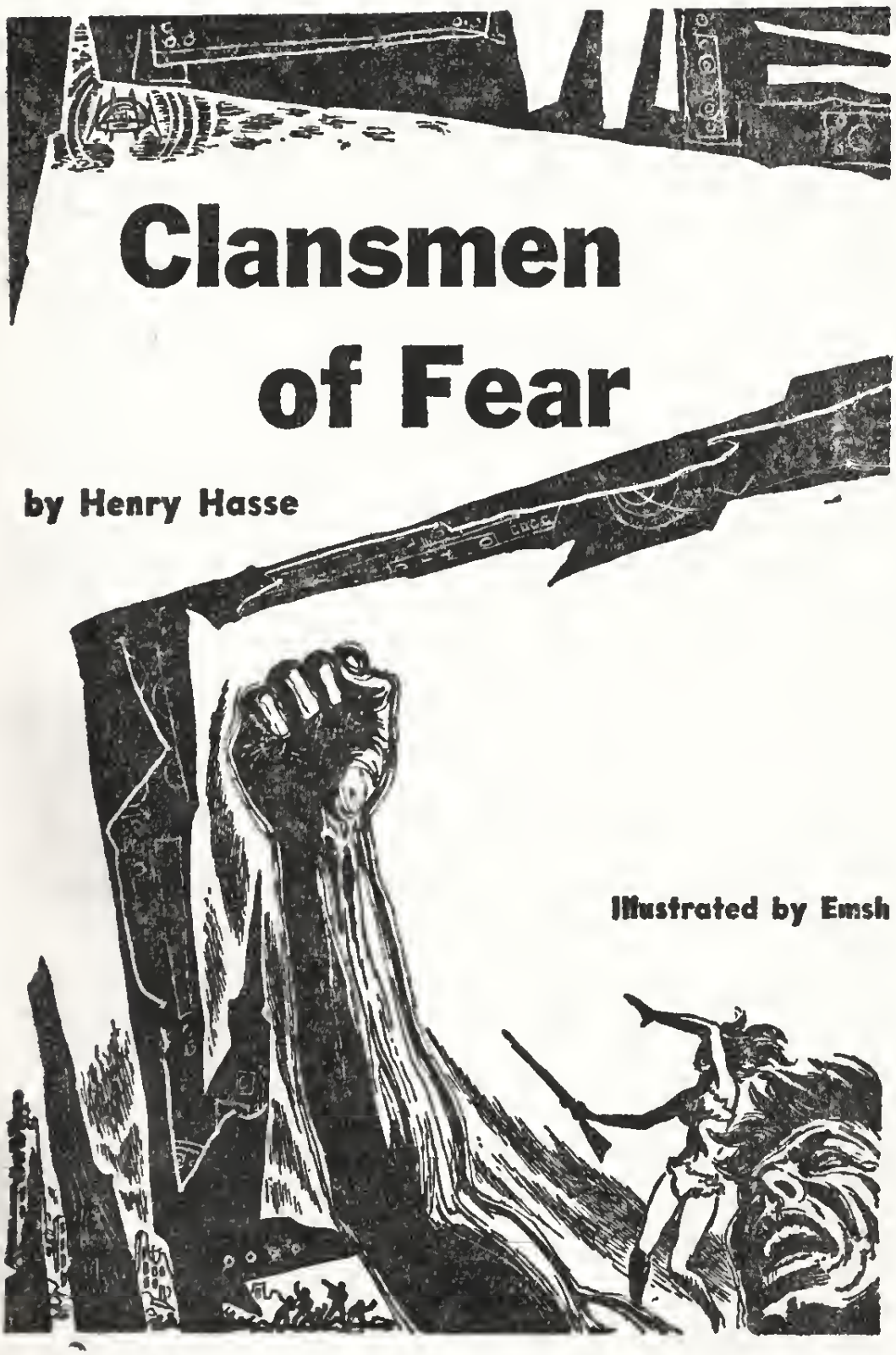
I would like to thank all you readers for your enthusiastic support of *Science Fiction Adventures.* Despite the fact that we already have two long-established magazines on the market —*New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy*—producing another such magazine, publicising it, distributing it, and getting it placed on show in the shops, means a lot of hard work, and it is only by the letters we are now receiving that we can tell whether this new action-adventure magazine is one that will find favour.

The policy of this magazine to run two or three short novels each issue has been very well received indeed. Of the three stories in the first issue Calvin M. Knox's " Chalice Of Death" was the most popular, a sequel to which is published in this issue. There is one more story to come and you will be pleased to know that the entire trilogy is to be published in book form in America this year.

C. M. Kornbluth's story " The Slave " came second in the first issue, but it is with very deep regret we inform you that he died very suddenly in March, at the age of 35, from a heart attack, thereby cutting off what would undoubtedly have been a brilliant career in the science fiction field. He had already written more than 100 short stories, as well as a number of outstanding novels.

There are many exciting stories coming in future issues, and not only do I advise you not to miss them, but also suggest that you recommend *Science Fiction Adventures* to your friends. I am sure that they will also enjoy the stories.

—J.C.



# Clansmen of Fear

by Henry Hasse

Illustrated by Emsh

*Henry Hasse is one of the real old-timers in the adventure science fiction field. This is his first magazine appearance in several years, but he has lost none of his magic touch. Seldom if ever has any writer succeeded in making his extra-terrestrials at once so alien, and so completely understandable, as Hasse has in* Clansmen of Fear.

# CLANSMEN OF FEAR

## by HENRY HASSE

*Helpless, Donal saw the embers of Terran civilisation grow dim—as the Zone's women turned oddly alien . . .*

**Illustrated by Emsh**

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### Chapter I

It was late afternoon of the second day when Kathri returned to the Village. Donal watched her striding across the south fields, lithe and long-limbed and tan, hair cascading liquidly to strike off coppery glints from the sun. She held her head high, and even from his distance Donal could discern something of stubborn pride and defiance.

He drew in his breath, feeling the quick surge of pulse which had bothered him of late when looking at Kathri ; but with an angry shift of the shoulders he put down his emotions. No, he would *not* be lenient ! He had been lenient last time. It had been a mistake. As Elder he had his duties, and the Word must be obeyed if his people were to survive for long.

" Gone two days," he muttered, " and without sanction of Council. It's not as if she didn't *know* the danger . . ." Donal frowned, his face like weathered brown stone. *One* day outside the Zone was the usual maximum before cellular dissolution. Could it be that Kathri was becoming—different ? Just as Dorthi had become different ?

Lips tight with displeasure, Donal strode to the edge of the Village to meet her.

" What am I to do with you, Kathri ? Don't look to me for favour this time ! You must be punished, you know."

She stood before him, lower lip thrust out a little. Donal sensed defiance there and a hint of something more, some secret beyond his ken.

Her voice came low and sullen. " I know."

" Well then, tell me ! Why did you not come to me for permission ?"

" ' The Zone is our world, and our law, and our Life,' " she quoted from Coburn's Scripture. " ' The Zone is our hope and our salvation. To leave the zone is the worst blasphemy —' " She halted, looked up suddenly, and her wide grey eyes met Donal's. " I do not believe it ! *You* do not believe ! And I did not come for permission because—you would not have granted."

Strange . . . Only a year ago he would have considered this blasphemy, but now he did not. Donal looked away from her eyes ; he stared beyond the low-rolling plains to where the skeletal structures of Chago were just visible. Even in the sunlight the brighter glow of the radiations could be seen, a steady blanketing arc across the dead city.

He faced her angrily. " Whether *I* believe is not important. Coburn's Scripture is our only guide, and as Elder I shall see that it is obeyed ! You cannot deny that you left the Zone, unaccompanied and unsanctioned ?"

She was silent.

" Perhaps you felt it necessary to visit the city. You had need of the radiation ?" But he knew she had not gone there. She was a member of Group Three, still months away from the Enlivening.

" No," she answered. " My trek was south, and—you may as well know it. I saw some of the Outlanders."

Donal was aghast, but he allowed his voice to drip scorn. " So for two days you were in the Outlands ! I presume it was Morghan's Group you saw."

" Yes !" Defiantly. " And I saw Dorthi ?"

Again her thrust told. Donal closed his eyes, remembering that day a year ago when Dorthi had gone. It had taken him a long time to get over the hurt. And it was more than a personal hurt. It had been sacrilege, an affront—and there was something of deeper meaning that he could not fathom. In three generations Dorthi was the first to leave the Zone, the first to have no further need of life-giving radiations. And now Kathri . . .

He opened his eyes and looked at her, and because of the renewed ache in his heart he tried to speak softly. " Kathri . . . twice now you have gone to your sister. And you still will not tell me why ?"

She shook her head. " I cannot."

" Very well, Kathri. I must prescribe punishment ! Or would you prefer that I place the matter before Council ?"

Stark alarm leaped to her eyes. " No, Donal ! I—I prefer that you prescribe."

It pleased him that she feared the council. He stood tall and gaunt above her, savouring the pleasure, as his gaze took in her long limbed contours. She was sixteen now ? Seventeen? Again there came the surge of pulse, but he fought against softening. His gaze flicked to the fields where the Villagers moved beneath the harsh sun, labouring against the stubborn soil where things would barely grow.

" You will work in the fields, Kathri. Every day for three months you will work. You are Adult now, and you must learn what the soil means."

" But my duties at the school, Donal—"

" Will continue ! You have deciphered the Books—faster than most—and the young ones must learn to decipher. You will work in the fields each day *after* the period of teaching."

She turned and strode away, and Donal watched her go. His shoulders shrugged in remote annoyance : he felt no victory. But overshadowing his thoughts was a feeling of bitterness, a sense of impeding loss. *Two days* she had been away from the Zone with no ill effects. There was no denying it—she was becoming different just as her sister, Dorthi, had become different.

He stood there towering and silent and watched Kathri until she entered her father's house. Then frowning, Donal strode back to help the others in the fields.

*It was midway of the second year (Basic Cygni Time) when they passed through the edge of the galaxy and entered the new sector. V'Naarik hunched forward to watch the huge astra-lens, the monotonous unfolding of stars. He wasn't worried yet. The photon tapes had registered a flow of* .921, *which meant the drainage was minor; their auxiliaries alone carried sufficient potential for the time-return.*

*Still, when repairs were in order it was best not to delay. V'Naarik flicked over to minimum galactic-drive and glanced again at the astra lens. Surely in all that expanse there must be planet-sustaining systems! Damn these Sector Surveys and damn the quota! In the interests of Empire it was necessary, he supposed, but when he returned this time he was definitely going to press for transfer . . .*

*He sat musing pleasantly on the possibilities of such a prospect, then was startled as the control-room door burst open. He whirled and saw Faantl standing there.*

*"Commander! Commander V'Naarik, sir—"*

*"What is it, Faantl? What's the meaning of this!" His tone lost its sharp edge as he stared at the man. Faantl's face was tight and scared, hands trembling as he gestured. V'Naarik surged to his feet. "Speak up, man! What's wrong?"*

*"Sir, you'd better come at once. Register is dropping! Even auxiliaries! The techs are checking now they think"—Faantl gulped—"they think it might be etheric loss!"*

After his evening meal, prepared and eaten alone, Donal felt a restless unease. It was partly Kathri—but there were other matters. Crops would not be good this year. The soil seemed more stubborn than ever. And now that Morghan's Group had returned, as they always did at the time of the crops . . .

Donal clenched his fists in helpless rage. Would they never be rid of these Outlanders who periodically came raiding, the nomadic ones who roamed the lands where the Zone dwellers could not follow? Proficient at thievery, they had neither the art nor inclination to till the soil. And he knew that Morghan's Group was only waiting now, as last year, skulking in the outlying forests until the crops were ready.

"By the ancient Coburn," Donal swore devoutly, "I'll see that the taking comes harder this year!"

He surged up from the chair and left his house and strode the streets of the Village. The night was warm and soft, the sky a comforting blanket.

No, not comforting. He looked up at the stars and then quickly away, as the vision of the void leaped down to smash against his eyes. The Books—some of the books that were left spoke of the stars, spoke learnedly in terms that Donal could scarcely grasp. He felt inadequate, looking at the stars. Inadequate and athirst and hopelessly alone.

He found himself at the Village outskirts where the tiny river rolled past. Again he gazed toward Chago, and saw the faint blanket-glow athrust against the darkening sky. *That* he understood. Coburn's records were full of it. Even now, so long after the—*Happening*—Donal thrilled to that ancient one's recounting. But often he felt his mind tumultuous with questions.

True, those radiations of the ruins meant life—or rather a renewing life-force for such as *they*, since without it they would die. That gruesome fact had been proved often enough. What made the Outlanders different, shunning the City as a place of death and horror? Donal would never admit it, but often of late he had found himself envying the Outlanders, their random life, their freedom to come and go. Much as he hated Morghan's Group, he envied them. And Dorthi was still with them; what was there about Dorthi which had enabled her—

He must read Coburn's Scripture again! The answer was there in the ancient Book, if only he could understand—

His thoughts were abruptly shattered, as a burst of rifle fire sent echoes crashing. Across the fields men were shouting. There came another staccato volley, and Donal could see flashes of orange over near the storehouses.

"Morghan's early this year," he grated, and was glad he had posted a guard. He hurried in that direction, then stopped as a footstep came in the street behind him.

"Donal!" He turned and saw Ral Phillips approaching. The man seemed in a terrible state of distress.

"Thank heaven I found you, Donal! I went to your house, but—"

"What is it, Phillips? Speak up, man!"

"My wife, Betha. She— I'm afraid it's pretty bad! We should not have delayed! If only she had come with us three weeks ago—"

Donal seized Phillips' arm. "The signs, man! Is it deterioration? She's not—"

" No. It's not too advanced yet, but I can see the signs ! She's in pain and I'm afraid the cells, the tissues—"

" She wasn't with Group Three at the last Enlivening ? Why, man, why ?"

" If you'll remember, Donal, she was then eight months with child and very ill ! She could not make the trip. She thought she might wait—"

Donal groaned. " When will you ever learn ? The enlivening is necessary, it cannot be bypassed !" He paused, listening. The sound of rifle fire was spasmodic now. He was sure Tanner and the guard could handle it. He seized Phillips' arm and hurried back through the street.

" Get your wife to the City at once. We'll leave immediately ! I'll see to the wagon and horses, meanwhile you get some of the women."

" They're already waiting."

" Good !" Donal paused. " How long would you say . . ."

" The child ? That too, Donal—soon, I'm afraid ! Surely before the night is over !" Phillips shivered where he stood.

" Stop worrying," said Donal. " The radiations are strong tonight. I'll get you to the City in two hours. Betha'll survive it, the replenishing comes quickly . . ."

## II

The replenishing was in time, but Betha lost her child, after entering the first-stage spasms of cellular dissolution. This was a thing Donal had seen before. He had seen it much worse than first-stages. They waited in agony for the turning, and then barely pulled her through.

Donal was bone tired as they reached the Village well past midnight. He stabled the horses and returned to his house, and found Tanner waiting to report on the raid.

" It was only a scouting party," said Tanner. " They came along the river. We handled them without too much trouble."

" Like thieves in the night," Donal said with heaving anger. " And it'll be worse ! Morghan's going to raid in strength this year . . ."

Tanner nodded, plainly worried. " Prepare yourself, Donal. Some of them had rifles— Lord only knows where they got them ! I've never seen Outlanders with rifles before !"

Donal stood in shocked silence. " How many ?" he said. " I counted two, possibly three. But who knows how many more they have ?"

Donal was wondering the same thing. He said grimly, " How many rifles in the Village now ?"

" Close to thirty. But some of those have ceased to function. It's the ammunition, Donal !"

" I know. We'll have to find more ! I'm calling the Council to session tomorrow—our only answer is to forage the City again. Perhaps those places far to the north."

Wearily, he turned away. Few of the weapons they found were workable any longer, even after thorough cleaning. And ammunition was becoming a greater problem ! Most of it turned out to be corroded, and it was almost impossible now to find good ammunition in the ruins.

*V'Naarik was worried now, but he must not let them know. He stood with his technicians gathered around him, the photon tape in his hands. Potential* .093 ! *It was worse than bad—it was unbelieveable.*

*He turned to the energonics engineer and said in a whisper :* " *This includes auxiliaries as well as primary-drive ! How can it be, Kyaala ?*"

" *I wish I knew, sir. Until a short time ago the tapes registered a perpetual* .921*—and we've made our periodic checks ! In all my experience—*"

" *In all your experience, my dear Kyaala, this may well prove to be your* last *experience unless we can—*" *Commander V'Naarik caught himself in time, and waved an imperative hand.* " *We'll run it again. I shall run it.*"

*Carefully, V'Naarik touched the de-energizer. Twice as carefully he released the tape into the actinium chamber. He watched anxiously as the beta rays sped unleashed to send the counter dials dancing. One thing he was sure of : that chamber was absolutely infallible, the latest product of the Empire laboratories. The error could not be there !*

*Seconds ticked away. A hush fell as the register dropped steadily. V'Naarik leaned forward to look, and there it was—potential* .093.

*Kyaala was more than miserable. He was frightened.* " *I've heard of dissipating sub-level energies, sir—but we would have caught that ! This has got to be something else. You don't suppose,*" *he paused sheepishly,* " *it could be—etheric loss ?*"

*V'Naarik gave him a scornful glance. Etheric loss was an old wives' tale ! V'Naarik hadn't heard of it since—*

*Wait. Yes, not too long ago. Dar Turibek had brought a tale back, claiming it had happened to him when he emerged from the galaxy fringe into a sub-sector. The astro-physicists were supposed to be studying it now. Theoretically there* could *be etheric-stress variables between galaxies . . .*

*He turned to face the techs and tried to keep his voice under control. " As of this moment we're on manual drive. Yes, I said manual ! I know it will be tedious, but we shall have to make planetary testings ! Rajjo—shield all generators. You, Kyaala, do everything you can to build up auxiliary potential ; we'll need every source of power for the search. Braliik ! See that all planetary scanners are made ready and then use them ! You know what to look for."*

*V'Naarik brought himself erect and gave them the final truth. " Well ? We have perhaps three days. Get to work, all of you —if you ever want to see Cygni again !"*

Donal watched Kathri in the fields the following day. She worked hard and uncomplainingly, with a certain stubborness. Perhaps the punishment was just what she needed.

Later that evening he sat alone in his house and stared at the Books.

Now his mood was shattered, the mood he had felt when he watched the soft surging haze of Chago to the north. He hated Chago ! He hated the radiation and all that it meant, their bleak existence and their barren little twelve-mile world.

Trapped ! Well, weren't they ? Why not admit it ? " The Zone is our world and our law and our Life," as the ancient Coburn put it. Donal laughed harshly as he rose to pace the room.

Captives within the Zone. He knew it too well ! And the experience of Phillip's wife last night brought it home to him. It made him remember that day two years ago, when he and a small group of the men had ventured too far beyond the Zone while hunting in the forests, and were delayed in returning. He remembered the half of them who had died. He remembered their pleadings when the realization came, the swift darkening skin and shredding flesh, their screams of agony as cellular tissues broke down for lack of the livening radiation.There had been nothing to do but leave them there ; he and half the others had made it back just in time, to lie ill and weakened for days.

Now more than ever he envied the Outlanders who moved free and unencumbered wherever they wished, without need of the replenishing.

Bitter with his thoughts, he strode to his shelf and pulled out the yellowing three-ringed book. Coburn's Scripture. Donal stared at the faded binding, the patched and tattered leaves, then hurled the book from him in a gust of anger. Scripture ! He was sick of it ! Truth was there, much of actual record—but much nonsense as well. Too much of speculation, forevisioning, all mixed up with terminology that Donal could never understand.

But Coburn was right about the Zone. He had foreseen that those few who were born and survived within its boundaries would be forever limited to the radiation, bound to it by need of cellular sustenance—something about essential salts in the blood and " hard impregnation " of the genes. Donal understood it only dimly. As for the rest, Coburn's crabbed writing about future generations and something he called "mutations" who might be born endowed with peculiar talents, physical or mental, beyond any previous knowing—Donal had given up trying to decipher it.

He returned to his chair and sat sprawling sullenly. There was so much beyond his ken ! In particular, Coburn's ancient terminology continued to bother him. " Mutations "! It was something strange supposed to happen to them later . . . Why had Coburn been so vague ? Donal *was* the future generation, and his life was no different from his father's as his father's before him. He still grubbed in the soil. He was still bound to the Zone. Of course there was the matter of Dorthi, and apparently Kathri was becoming like her . . .

Donal sat bolt upright. *Different.* Could that be what Coburn meant ? Was Dorthi the first ? Somehow Donal had assumed that the mysterious thing would effect them all . . . or had Coburn mentioned that it would be discriminate and isolated ? He couldn't remember . . .

The rap at the door startled him, and he sank back into his chair. " Enter !" he called.

The door pushed open, and Kathri stood there. She paused for a moment and then stepped hesitantly inside. Tall and slim she looked—but not all slimness either. That was another thing Donal had noticed of late. He turned his head away and grumbled in his throat.

"Girl—if you come to ask that I reconsider the punishment, you're wasting your time. The council would have been more severe—as I should have been !"

She didn't speak. She turned her head about, examining the room as if seeing it for the first time ; as if she hadn't been there many times before, to pore through the books. Donal watched her now and said nothing.

She spied Coburn's Scripture lying in the corner where Donal had hurled it. Softly, she walked over and picked it up. She re-arranged the crumpled pages. She stepped to the shelf and placed the book where it belonged, and without a word moved toward the curtained doorway into the kitchen.

Donal heard her moving around out there, doing something with the pans he'd neglected to put away. Presently she returned, bringing a steaming pot of coffee and a cup.

*Coffee supplies are low*, Donal thought. *We'll be lucky if we find more at the City* . . . But he said nothing.

Turning, Kathri spied his pipe and tobacco tin on the table. She looked at him questioningly. With an effort of will, Donal shook his head. *Tobacco too*, he thought.

She came and sat on the rug at his feet.

" The punishment was just, Donal. I deserved more ! But that's not why I came."

Donal sipped appreciatively at the coffee, and watched her.

" I *had* to leave the Zone, Donal. Don't you see ? I find it hard to explain—but I'll try—I know you'll understand."

" I understand, Kathri. You were very close, you and Dorthi. You felt you had to see your sister again ?"

" More than felt. Dorthi *wanted* me to come ; she talked to me and asked me to come, because—she had something to tell."

Donal placed his cup on the table, very gently, and leaned forward to stare at her. " Kathri. I want you to think carefully before you answer. You say Dorthi *asked* you to come ? When was this ?"

" Three days ago."

" But Dorthi was not here three days ago. She has been gone for a year !"

She looked up at him with anguished pleading. " I said it would not be easy to explain— I have not dared speak of it before ! Oh, Donal, I thought *you* would understand !"

" I will, Kathri. I'm trying. Tell me—just how did Dorthi talk with you ?"

" Well . . . by words that have no sound. But not words either !" She frowned, then touched her forehead. " I just *feel* the thoughts here, and right away I know what Dorthi—"

Donal felt his mind spinning. He got up from his chair and paced away, not daring to look at her. Telepathy ! He had learned that much from Coburn's writing, and he understood essentially how it might be. But faced with it now he couldn't believe it. It was just too fantastic ! *Mutant.* Coburn's prediction was happening ; this must be the beginning. . . .

" You're not angry with me, Donal ?"

" Angry ? Of course not ! You can't help it if you're—" He caught the words abruptly, aware that anger was in his voice. He paced back and stood looking down at her, as an appalling thought occurred. " You—cannot receive other thoughts ? Only Dorthi's ?"

" Oh, others too, but only faintly as yet." She smiled up at him and her eyes danced knowingly. " But much better than last year ! Sometimes when you look at me—like yesterday in the fields—"

He flushed darkly and quickly changed the subject. " You said Dorthi had something to tell ! What was it ? Something about the Outlanders ?"

" No, not that. Just things. Woman things. She has a husband now, and —" Kathri paused, frowning. " Yes. There was something else."

" Then what, girl ? It must have been important !"

She looked at him, lower lip thrust out a little. " You won't believe me. You wouldn't believe me last time."

" I'll believe you, Kathri. I'll believe *anything* you tell me now !"

" Well, it's—Dorthi. These *things* come much stronger to her now. And she has seen the lights again, Donal. This time very strong !"

The last time ! Donal remembered now. It was over a year ago, just before Dorthi had left the Zone. Dorthi had been strangely silent and moody, but she confided in her younger sister. And Kathri had gone to the Council with some garbled story about Dorthi being able to " see lights " that no one else could see. No one had listened, for Kathri was scarcely more

than a child. But a week later came the marauding groups from the west, to pillage and rob the fields—*just as Dorthi had said they would come*. Four Village men had died in that battle.

Donal gestured for his pipe. Kathri tamped the tobacco expertly and handed it to him ; her gaze was anxious on his face.

For a long minute he smoked in silence. He was beginning to understand Coburn better now ; the " mutations " would come in strange and diverse ways ! Dorthi and Kathri—and which family would be next ?

He leaned forward, took her shoulders gently and felt her shiver beneath his touch. " I believe you, Kathri. Now you must tell me ! Do you also see—the lights ?"

She shook her head. " No. Not yet. Dorthi says later perhaps I will."

" But when Dorthi sees—these lights—it's not in the way you or I would see ? It's—here ?" His fingers brushed his forehead.

She nodded solemnly, aware of his concern.

" Good. Now, what about after she sees the lights ?"

" It's not after. It all happens at once. She says that she *knows* things—just for an instant ! Things that have not yet happened, but are about to happen . . ."

Donal nodded. Precognition ! Again he was remembering Coburn's strange terms, which seemed less strange to him now.

" And this time, Kathri. What has Dorthi seen that—that will happen ?"

" Men. Many men will come."

" From the west ? The south ? More marauding groups ?"

She shivered, huddling close to Donal's knees. " No. This time it is different. They will come—from a place that Dorthi doesn't know. Very far ! Strange men such as none of us have ever seen ! They will come to the City, and they have strange machines, and they use the machines—" Her voice broke and she looked up at him, fright in her eyes. " Something will happen to the City. There is danger, Donal—much danger ! For us and all the groups !"

" What else ? What else could Dorthi see ?"

" I'm not sure. I think there was more, but Dorthi would not tell. She became frightened, and—it made me frightened."

A chill was dragging at Donal's spine, but he must not let Kathri know. He tossed his pipe aside. " Kathri. This thing is important. I must go and talk with your sister ! Tomorrow I'll have the wagons made ready, and you must come along to show us where Morghan's encamped. It's not too far ?"

" Scarcely half a day. We'll be safe. Morghan bears no enmity, not really, Donal. They are good people."

" Good people ! Does Morghan intend to raid our crops again this year ? Did you learn that, by any chance ?"

Kathri flushed darkly, and for a long moment she was silent. " Donal . . ."

" Yes, Kathri ?"

" I no longer have need of the radiations. I can go away from the Zone ! I could go to stay, as Dorthi has gone. We—we have become different."

He waited, gazing down at her.

" Dorthi has asked me to come."

He felt quick panic. A heavy throbbing at his throat. He tried to make his voice calm. " Your father would not like it, Kathri, if you left the Village. He would be sad to lose both daughters—"

She looked up ; he was startled to see her eyes moist and glistening. " And you ? You, Donal ?"

" Yes. I would be very sad. I could not bear it. I— Oh, Kathri. I do not want you to go ! Kathri, Kathri . . ."

Suddenly she was weeping, face buried in his knees. " I don't *wish* to leave the Village, Donal. Not ever, not ever ! Not if you . . . if you want me . . ."

He stroked her hair gently, his heart welling with all the burden of the lonely days, " I do, Kathri. I want you very much. I want you here ! Kathri ?"

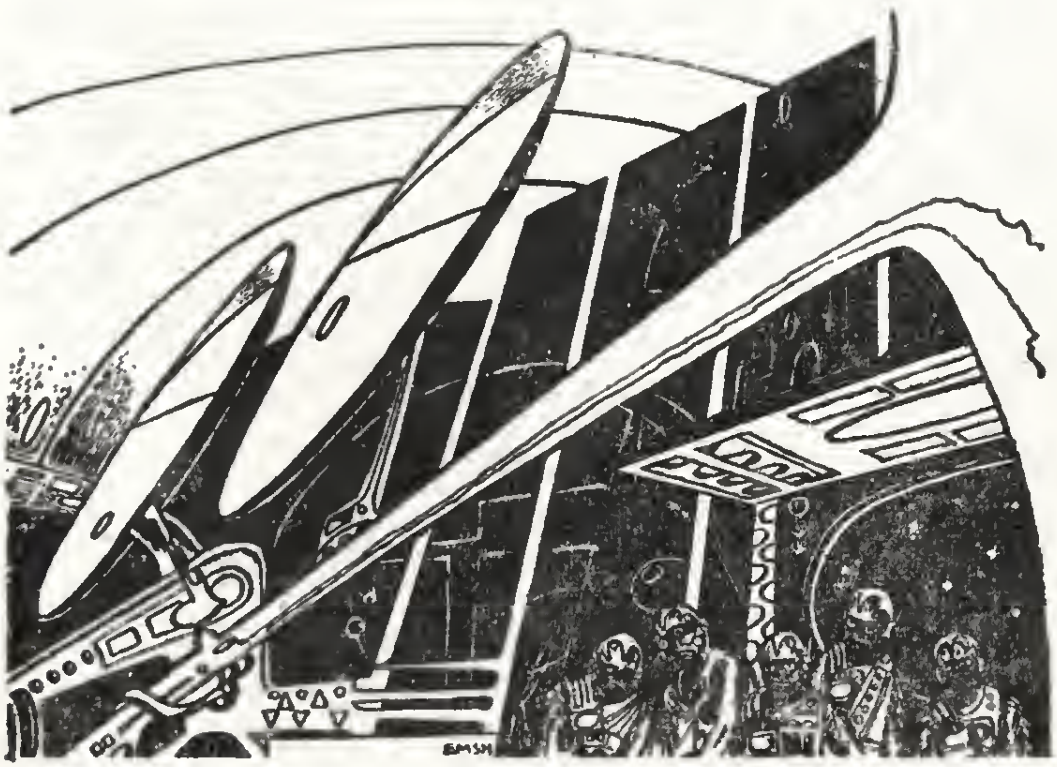
" Yes ?"

" I shall speak with your father tomorrow, Kathri."

## III

Tanner was ready, and Ashley, and the two Loren boys and half a dozen others. Mears alone refused to come. " I don't like leaving the Zone, Donal. It's dangerous, and what's the sense of it ? Sure, I know Council has sanctioned the trip, but I remember that time two years ago—"

Donal remembered too. He was trying not to think of it.



" Look. We'll be back in time ! Morghan's Group is close, and I've allowed a margin of safety." He smiled wryly at Mears. " Very well, then. One of the others will use your rifle. We may get some game along the way."

That did it. Mears hurried back to his house for his rifle. Forays beyond the Zone were dangerous, but the men were always willing to risk it for fresh provender.

Ashley grinned, fondling his rifle. " We may find more than game, eh, Donal ? Maybe some Outlanders ? Lord, it's been a long time since I've used this !"

Donal whirled upon him. " None of that, Ashley ! Listen, you men ! There'll be no warring on Outlanders ! We go in peace. If we encounter game, well and good—but our primary purpose is to contact Morghan's group ! Is that understood?"

There were grumblings of assent.

" Very well. Ten hours at the most is our limit. If anything goes wrong—trouble with the wagons, horses going lame—we turn back at once."

Kathri rode in the lead-wagon with Donal, and soon they were on the crumbling concrete road leading south. Donal gazed about with livening interest. According to the books there had once been machines travelling this road, machines that made a full days' travel in one hour. He had seen many of those machines in the City, shattered and rusting, so it must have been true. And he remembered his very first trip to the City with his father. Donal was then about nine, and his father pointed the machines out to him, with some wistful talk about " fuel " to make them go. But nowhere in the City had they found the " fuel," only the blackened places where it once had been.

He became aware of Kathri beside him. She sat straight and silent, gaze fixed on the rolling lands ahead but occasionally she glanced at Donal as though wishing to speak.

" What it it, Kathri ?"

" The—the thing you said last night. You meant it, Donal ? That you would speak with my father—this morning—"

Donal threw back his head and laughed, and placed an arm about her. " And so I did, Kathri. *Early* this morning. It will be arranged—when we return."

Swift crimson touched her face, but she nestled close to him. The morning sun was gently warm and never before had the skies seemed so clear, with all about them the tang of green

growing things. Presently she became worried, glancing at the men's rifles behind her.

Donal said bluntly : " You fear what may happen when we meet Morghan."

" Yes Donal. When we come armed in this way—"

" It is necessary ! I wish them to see that we're prepared. But I have a plan, Kathri ; it may end this hostility between our peoples if only Morghan will listen."

But it was Dorthi who occupied his thoughts, not Morghan. Her vision of strange men who would come, with strange machines, worried him more than he cared to admit.

For a long time they proceeded in silence. No game had been sighted, and Donal could hear the disappointed grumblings of his men. The route was becoming tortuous now ; foliage sprang high and thick to encroach upon the road, while the forests lay on every side beyond.

Suddenly a shot rang out from the second wagon. Mears leaped into the undergrowth to pull in the deer which he had brought down. Minutes later came another shot, and then another. The men were exultant now.

Donal glanced anxiously overhead. The sun told him that three hours had passed ! Had he allowed enough margin for safety ? If they should have trouble with Morghan—

He turned quickly to Kathri. " This is the way ? You are sure ?"

And then, before she could answer, Donal saw the Outlander. The man stood in a tiny clearing just ahead, a startled look on his dark face as he caught sight of the wagons. Ashley saw him too ; he let out a yell and his rifle came up.

Donal acted barely in time. He sprang backward to the bed of the wagon, throwing up an arm. Ashley's shot went wild, clipping off branches above the Outlander's head. The latter whirled and sped away, soon was lost in the tangling shadows.

" You fool ! You utter fool !" Livid with anger, Donal whirled upon Ashley. " Do you realize what that might have done ? Loren—take his rifle. Don't let the fool touch it again !"

Ashley was contrite, but the damage had been done. Donal drove on in bitter silence. Kathri was peering ahead, and presently she pointed to a place where the road dipped low to cross a stream near a crumbling culvert.

" This is the place ! I found Morghan's Group very close to here."

There was no further doubt. A score of men leaped out from the trees to bar the way. They were a ragged lot, dark-skinned and bearded ; two of them carried rifles, Donal noticed, but the rest were equiped with clubs and wicked-looking thongs.

Donal turned quickly to his men. " Be careful," he cautioned. " And don't be surprised at what I do !"

He brought the horses to swift rein, climbed down leisurely and walked forward, cradling his rifle. In the brief silence he noticed the difference. The skins of the Outlanders were dark and leathery, coarse-grained ; his own skin, while equally tan from working in the fields, was smooth and faintly shimmering, almost translucent.

Again he surveyed the Outlander throng. Only the two rifles were in evidence.

" I would speak with Morghan !" Donal addressed the nearest man. " At once, fellow ! We have little time."

The man didn't answer. He was staring past Donal, gaze fixed greedily upon Kathri. Donal saw it and bristled with quick anger. " Take your eyes away, fellow !" He lifted the rifle and strode forward.

The man crouched back sullenly, but Donal did not seem satisfied. This was the moment he wanted. Tossing his rifle aside, he stepped forward and deliberately back-handed the Outlander across the mouth. It was a provoked insult—and a challenge.

The man's eyes widened, then became delighted. With a roar he launched himself forward. Donal danced lightly away, parrying. The Outlander was approximately his own height, with possibly an advantage in weight. A clubbing fist took Donal in the side, and the breath left his body. He lost his footing, but recovered and drove two blows into the Outlander's face that left the man spinning.

With mutters of approval the others had fallen back to form a circle. Again the Outlander came boring in. The man had weight and knew how to use it ! Donal met his rush, parrying and rolling—but a fist crashed through that brought blood from his mouth and left him dazed. A knee caught Donal in the stomach. Another blow to the groin left him doubled over with a burning sickness. Before he could move,

another knee caught him beside the head and he was sprawled face downward upon the ground.

More mutters of approval from the Outlanders. Donal shook his head dazedly. He knew the sort of tactics they liked now ! Fighting the pain and nausea, he launched himself upward. The man was boring in again. Donal side-stepped, jabbed to carry his opponent off-balance. The man laughed contemptuously. A lashing fist to the mouth erased it, then Donal feinted the man's guard and crashed a right hand that left the Outlander tottering. The next blow brought him to his knees. Donal leaped in. A back-handed smash across the eyes. Another behind the neck. Viciously, Donal brought his knee up full into the man's throat and the Outlander sprawled backward, limp and gasping.

He came up slowly. Contemptuously, Donal put both hands on his shoulders and sent him sprawling again. The man raised his hands feebly in signal of defeat.

There wasn't a murmur from the circle of Outlanders now. Donal stepped back, wiping blood from his mouth.

" I would speak with Morghan !" he said again.

" I am Morghan." A giant of a man, full bearded and tall, much taller than Donal, pushed his way through the throng. He paused to glance at the battered Outlander. " Take this one away," he said to one of his men. " Put him with the women, since he fights like a woman."

He turned to Donal. " I am Morghan. I think you remember me—Donal ?"

Donal surveyed him coolly for a moment. " I remember. From last year, when you came raiding our crops !"

" And perhaps this year as well—Zone-Dweller !"

" That will be interesting—Outlander !"

" Hairless one ! You who are bound to the ruins !"

" Bearded one ! You who hunt with spears and clubs !" Donal exchanged epithets, knowing it was expected.

Morghan bowed slightly. Now that the exchange was over, he waited.

Donal glanced at the array of rifles behind him. " You come raiding this year, Morghan, and many of your men will die."

Still the man waited, not answering, a glint of amusement in his eyes. And then Donal knew the reason. " Morghan !" One of the Outlanders had circled wide behind the wagons, and raised the canvas, to discover the deer carcasses.

Morghan went to look, and then came striding back to Donal. Mockery was in his tone. " It seems that *you* are proficient in raiding, hairless one !"

Donal gave a tight smile, lifting his rifle. " It was easy—with these. The forests are free !"

" But the City is not free—to us. You know that the City means death to us because of the radiations !"

Donal pondered. There was truth in Morghan's words. He glanced at Tanner and the others who moved restlessly behind him not liking any of this.

" And you are aware, Morghan, that to stay for long outside the Zone means death for us. It's rarely that we dare come into the forests for game."

" And yet you come today," replied Morghan, a dangerous smile about his lips. " You come with many rifles—and one of my men was fired upon."

Donal had been expecting that. He felt his men pressing closer, and he caught the sullen looks from the Outlander Group. If it came to a showdown, the rifles would win, but many men would die. He spoke quickly :

" It was a stupid accident, Morghan. And I do not condone such accidents ! I assure you the man responsible for it will be punished !" He turned to Loren. "Give me Ashley's rifle."

Loren passed it over, and Donal tossed the rifle to Morghan. " It is yours ! A gift from me."

Before Morghan could recover from his surprise, Donal played his ace card. His gaze flicked to the pair of Outlanders who carried rifles. " I see that you already have a few firearms. I seem to recognize them. Perhaps," he added meaningfully, " that is another reason why we prefer to avoid the forests."

Morghan flushed with quick anger. " We do not kill men wantonly, Donal !"

" Did I say it ? I merely thought you might care to explain how you came in possession."

" Two months ago we stumbled upon a pair of your men out here. They were already dead, and their flesh—" Morghan's face twisted, he seemed not to want to talk about it. " So we took their rifles," he said sullenly.

Donal remembered. Calkins and Stuart, who had gone off alone and never returned. They hadn't been the first. He dismissed it now, as he looked into Morghan's face and liked what he saw there.

" I believe that you speak truth, Morghan, so I will speak truth. We come here today for two reasons." He paused, aware that every man was intent upon his words. " Morghan, the City is a vast and bewildering place. It is beyond your imagining ! I suspect that we still have not scoured it all. There are some great areas outlying to the north, which we have scarcely touched because the passage is so dangerous."

" Keep speaking, Donal," Morghan's voice came in a whisper.

" It is possible that we may find more rifles there, and ammunition. If we provide you with them, will you bring us game ? In exchange for that, you may share in our crops without raiding."

Morghan was at once startled and eager. " How many rifles, Donal ?"

" Who can say ? Whatever we can spare. First you must prove your faith—and if we do provide you, a balance must be maintained !"

Morghan caressed the rifle in his arms, and Donal knew he had won his point. " Come to our camp," said Morghan. " We will talk this matter over."

" No ! We'll discuss it another time—perhaps soon. When I have sat with my Council and you have sat with yours. Just now I must speak with Dorthi ! It's very important, Morghan, and we have little time !"

" Dorthi ? The strange one who left your Zone ?" Morghan nodded. " Come," he said, " I will take you to her."

They sat at the edge of a stream beyond the camp—Donal and Kathri and Dorthi. From behind them came the shouts and laughter of Donal's and Morghan's men, as they prepared a feast over the fires.

" Dorthi . . . Kathri has told me about your vision of the men who will come. Strange men, she said, such as none of us has ever seen. It's very important that I know ! If the City is in danger . . ."

Dorthi was older than Kathri by two years. She took her sister's hand now, with something like motherly affection.

" Can you remember, Dorthi ? I believe in your vision ! Now I believe ! What kind of men are they ? And you are sure—they'll come to the Zone ?"

" Yes, Donal. I saw them at the City. But that is yet to come !"

Donal said uncertainly, " I think I understand that."

" Men like you, but—but strangely different. Their colour —it is like the pans you use for cooking !"

" Silver ?"

She nodded.

Donal sat motionless, feeling a cold horror rise in him. " I've never seen Outlanders like that ! Where will they come from? The east—the north ?"

She leaned forward with hands touching her brow. " I still remember it, Donal. I saw it so clearly ! Not east, or north, but—" She straightened and lifted a hand to the sky. " From there ! They will come down in machines through the night. Machines that swim in a glow of colour. But these are not as frightening as the machines they bring with them—"

Again Donal felt horror. It washed over him in waves, much like that time when he had been far outside the Zone with little time to return. He glanced at Kathri, who huddled close, clinging to her sister. She knew ! She knew that her sister spoke the truth—

" Dorthi, listen to me. When ? When do they come ?"

" I'm not sure. Soon, I think. One day—two. I know it will be at night."

Precognition ! Would the ancient Coburn have understood all this, he wondered ? And Kathri—would *she* have this frightening talent after a few years ?

He thrust the thought away. Again he questioned Dorthi, until she became weary of answering. She could tell him little more. Donal knew he would have to persuade the Council, rouse them to the danger. He called his men and they hurried back to the wagons, where Donal spoke briefly with Morghan.

" I'll return, Morghan. Just as soon as possible. Never fear, our peoples shall have the pact !" But just now Donal felt an urgency and a foreboding, a far greater threat than Outland raiders.

As they pulled out, he saw Dorthi in heated conversation with her husband, a tall youth who had watched suspiciously during their talk. Now he was protesting angrily. He seized her arm, but Dorthi pulled away and came racing after them, to climb into the seat beside Kathri.

Donal gave her a gauging glance. " You're coming with us ? While your husband stays here !"

" I must ! I'll return. But now I must come with you. I—I want to be with Kathri."

Her voice was strange, and stranger still was the way she buried her face in Kathri's shoulder. It was almost, Donal thought, as if she *knew* she were going to be with her sister for the last time.

Donal felt a chill at his spine. He wondered—he just wondered if there was something Dorthi hadn't told him?

## IV

"Wait!"

Donal thrust out a hand, and the others hugged the shattered stone of the buildings as they came to a halt behind him.

Cradling his rifle, he peered through the darkening streets ahead. This was their usual route into the City, the rubbled terrain familiar to them all; but Donal's eyes were not upon the streets now. He raised his face to the dark sky and glittering stars.

Was it only imagination—or had one of the stars moved? A dozen times this night he thought he had seen it. He waited, face upturned, feeling the quick pulse of excitement.

It hadn't been easy, convincing the Council. Almost to a man they were sceptical of Dorthi's tale; this girl who had run away to become an Outlander was not to be trusted in any event, and who was to say this was not some scheme of Morghan's? But it was Donal's grim concern, more than his eloquence, that finally swayed them, and it was decided the City should be patrolled. But even so, Donal knew that Tanner and the others didn't quite believe.

Again Donal peered, and suddenly went tense as there came a definite movement across the sky. That was no star! It moved in a distinct arc, blossoming slowly out from a pinpoint of light. Then there were two. Swiftly they came and without a sound dropping through the night, two squarish fluctuating patches of light.

Meteors? No meteor had ever acted like that! The men crouched and waited for concussion. But there was no concussion or sound; uncannily, the lights seemed to hover for a minute and then disappeared behind the skeletal buildings far ahead.

So now his men believed! Donal heard them jabbering excitedly behind him. Still he peered upward; stars glittered, but no more of the patches came.

" Mears," he called. " Take three men and circle to the right ! Tanner, your men will go left. You know the streets. Keep out of sight—remember, this is reconnaissance !"

Tanner answered, and his voice was shaken. " If we should sight these—these men ? They'll surely be armed—"

" I said it's reconnaissance ! You are not to fire." Donal paused, considering. " Unless," he added grimly, " you hear my shots first. That will be the signal to come on the double."

He strode ahead, keeping close to the buildings. Kathri and Dorthi followed, together with three of the men. The girls has insisted on coming despite his protests ; they were both good with rifles. There had been something strangely urgent in Dorthi's insistence . . .

They pressed forward, clambering across rubble and skirting the weakened structures. Danger was here, and not alone from the men out of the sky. Donal had known some of these structures to come crashing down. Many of the steel girders were exposed, corroded by time and the elements, while in other places only heaps of powdered masonry and fused metal marked the spots where buildings had stood.

He heard Kathri coming behind him, stumbling, just a little frightened. He remembered then—it was her first trip here at night. At night it was not good. He fell back to walk beside her.

Dorthi came too, strangely silent in step and mood.

The City was softly aglow, not appreciable near at hand, but the merest tinge just discernible in the widening distance. Already Donal could feel the Enlivening ! Every cell of his body seemed to flourish in response. " *The Zone is our world, and our Law and our Life—*"

Quickly, he put down the vague unease that rose to disturb his mind. He stared across a barren space toward a building whose walls had toppled inward. He would never forget this place ! It was the place where his father had died, trying to find access to some books which he knew to be inside. He had been barely twelve years old at the time.

Donal marched on, thinking of those two descending patches of light. There had been something ominous about their soft soundlessness. Men from the stars ? He could scarcely believe it, though some of the books did mention the possibility of such things . . .

They were nearing the huge barren place at the heart of the City where most of the buildings had toppled outward. Donal turned, cautioned the men to silence. He felt sure that the light-patches had descended somewhere close to here. They slipped on softly, avoiding the debris and hugging the shadows.

And then Donal saw it—saw it for a single petrifying instant. He sprang back swiftly, gathering Kathri in one arm as he scurried to the shelter of a shattered doorway. The others followed suit, falling against the stone behind him.

Resting in the centre of the rubble-strewn area, some thirty yards away, was something beyond comprehension. It appeared to be a machine of sorts—a platform, glass-enclosed, with six vanes spaced about its perimeter. From the vanes came a soft surging violet radiance that rose and fell, rose and fell, as if from some internal heart.

But Donal was watching the men. The silver men ! There were six of them. They had come down from the platform and were now engaged in manipulating another machine, a thing of towering tubes and reaching antennae and vast spiralling coils.

Kathri pressed forward, whispering at his ear. " The men of silver. Dorthi was right !" She clutched the rifle as she crept forward. " Donal—what are they doing ?"

" Whatever it is, it's not good ! Wait—" Donal edged out from the doorway, easing his rifle forward.

Those towering tubes had come alive with a strange brilliance—dimming, then rising, dimming and rising to livid colour, with a sort of insatiability that was frightening. Donal heard the singing of coils. He saw the pronged metal fingers turning in every direction. And then with a shock he saw a subtle difference in the soft radiation-glow that overlay the area. That glow was concentrating *inward—inward without cessation from all the distance around, to coalesce about the platform.*

Donal could not have said how it was happening, but in that instant he knew ! He knew it would continue. This was but a sample. Other machines would be brought, to suck the radiation into the coils until all the City was left a dark and desolate heap.

For some reason these silver men wanted the radiation.

And if that happened, he—the Villagers, the Zone-Dwellers—Dorthi had been right. These men brought evil !

He felt a quick upsurge of anger. Suddenly the stock of the rifle was familiar against his shoulder, and he was squeezing the trigger again and again.

One of the silver men—the one nearest the coils—dropped without a sound, rolled over and lay still. Donal exulted ! Behind him, Loren's rifle cracked in his ear. Another silver man staggered but failed to go down. And suddenly there were no longer any silver men out there ! With a speed that left Donal gaping, they had scattered away from the machine to take shelter behind the debris.

Donal cursed softly. Perhaps he had erred in firing so soon. Surely invaders such as these would be armed !

He peered across the area, searching out the debris. No movement anywhere. He nodded grimly ; at this sort of deployment his men were masters.

" Loren," he called softly. " They may try to reach the building over there. You and Brown cover that space. The rest follow me, and keep to the walls ! When we get closer, spread out and find cover ; fire a few rounds to keep them pinned down."

They moved forward, crouched low, searching out the ruins and doorways. Kathri was close beside him, rifle held ready ; Donal wished he hadn't permitted her to come ! He thought he saw a bulk, faintly shimmering. Again he fired, and the bulk dropped quickly out of sight.

Still no movement out there. His eyes searched the surrounding streets . . . Had Mears' and Tanners' groups heard the shots ? They ought to be arriving soon.

Donal was puzzled now. Why was there no answering fire from these silver men ? Five of them left, he thought grimly ; he could still see the one lying at the edge of the platform.

The platform ! Perhaps their weapons were there ! If so, this would be easier—

Then suddenly Dorthi was crouched beside him, whispering urgently :

" Donal, wait ! I—I'm getting their thoughts. They are not concerned with us. They are—in contact with someone else—"

" I can feel it too," Kathri whispered. " Their minds are strong !"

Donal gripped Dorthi's arm. " In contact with who ?"

" Talking. Talking with someone overhead. A ship, a

great ship ! Telling what has happened. Asking for more men to come." She paused. " Yes, many more will come."

" These five ! Can you tell if they're armed ? Quickly !"

It was Kathri who answered. " Yes ! *They have weapons, they can harm us*— Donal, wait ! We cannot win—"

But he was on his feet, calling to the men on either side : " Cover me !" Then he was sprinting for the platform, rifle thrust forward, eyes searching as he ran. A shot rang out behind him and he saw a silver man ploughing for cover. More shots covered him. A silver man sprang up, very close, holding a strangely pronged tube ; something thin and pale lashed out and Donal felt heat at his shoulder. He swung the rifle stock up viciously, caught the man solidly below the chin, and his way was clear.

He reached the platform, sprang through a narrow doorway. He turned, and it was then he saw that Kathri had come behind him, stumbling and gasping—but she still clung to her rifle ! Donal pulled her in, glanced quickly around. He thrust hard against a protruding lever, and a glassite sheathe closed swiftly across the opening.

Kathri stumbled to her feet, still gasping. " Donal ! What do you hope to gain ?"

He didn't answer. He was crossing to the centre of the dome-enclosed room where a set of controls thrust upward. No time now for selection ! If these men were sending more reinforcements— Grasping the central bar, he tugged, and it came free with a soft clicking movement.

The ascent was so abrupt that Donal staggered, pushed the bar away in panic. Nothing happened ! The ground was dropping away at a dizzying rate. Desperately, he fumbled at the control. At last it clicked into place, and their ascent halted gently as though against a cushion of air.

Together, they peered through the transparent floor. The City was an awesome sight far below. Kathri shuddered and turned her eyes away. " Donal—"

" No ! We can't return now." Excitement was on him, and the dawning of a plan. He surveyed the interior of the shell. It was bare save for the central control and a four-foot screen of glass with panelling beneath. A soft violet aura sprang from their outer perimeter. " I'll learn to control this thing !"

It was very simple after all, merely movements of the bar in the desired direction. The faintly clicking ratchets and delicacy of touch was the secret. Suddenly they were surging upward.

" Donal, our men are down there !"

" And they'll hold their own," he said grimly. " Those we saw were only the vanguard. They must not send more ! If there's a ship overhead we may be able to reach it. I want to talk with these men !"

He saw the doubt in her eyes.

" Kathri, they're only human, the same as us !" He was remembering that rifle stock against the silver man's chin, the way he had toppled back with pain and surprise on his flat face. " Our only chance is to establish an understanding with these people !"

But what was it Dorthi had tried to tell him ? That they couldn't win. She was resigned, she had seemed to know . . . Donal felt a sudden terrible doubt, a tightness at his throat. Suppose he did find the ship ? Could he talk to these alien ones ? Was it possible to make them understand about the radiations ?

Suddenly he remembered the strange pronged instrument which the silver man had aimed at him.

And he remembered something else. A silver man was dead ! The other five might be dead too, if Tanner and the others did their work. If this alien race was the veangeful kind—

" We must make them understand ! It's our only chance, Kathri."

She didn't answer, but stood silent and resigned, the colour gone from her lips. She seemed to know, as Dorthi had known. . . .

They were very high now, much higher than he dared guess. The City was a dwindling dot of haze. The sky had taken on a terrible blackness, and a chill was creeping in. Perhaps he should return ! They could make a stand at the City—

He glanced at Kathri and knew she was thinking the same. He wavered—and suddenly it was decided for him.

Angling swiftly down from the left was a squarish patch of light, another platform. It was still far away, but growing larger. There came a shrill buzzing sound, and Donal whirled to see the panels aglow beneath the screen. They blinked on

and off, insistently. He stood hesitant for a moment, then his hand came down on the protuding knob.

The screen leaped alive abruptly. Reflected there was a silver man, huge-visaged, a look of stark surprise on his face as he stared point-blank at Donal. The merest second—then the screen went blank.

Instantly, Donal knew he had erred. His hand came down on the bar, and with a lurch they slid to the right in a long descent.

The other platform was growing and taking shape, as it slid unerringly toward them. Donal tried to ease off. Upward on the bar, left, right—swiftly downward again. It was no use. The other came faster, twisting and plunging to follow their every move.

Then he saw the second platform. Two more ! And still a third ! They were closing in, violet auras slicing the night, keeping a pattern above him. Two beams of light lashed out, crossing just above, and that part of the sky seemed to tear asunder. Their shell went buffeting downward. Again the beams came, spraying the shell with heat and blinding brilliance.

" Only one direction now," Donal yelled. "We're going to take it !" His hand came down on the control bar—hard.

They were twisting and plunging earthward. All power seemed to fail. Donal fought to hold the controls, but the bar was torn from his grasp as he struck the opposite wall with a force that exploded all breath from his body.

Slowly, he tried to rise. His vision seemed blurred. Where was Kathri ? He caught a glimpse of earth, then it became a twisting kaleidoscope together with sky and stars. *The controls ! He must reach the controls—*

Then he saw the controls—overhead, beyond reach. And he saw Kathri, a huddled motionless heap. Fighting against nausea, he gained his feet, braced himself, leaped and caught the control bar clung precariously. Slowly he gained leverage. The earth was rushing up fast, a whitish haze, the City . . . skeletal buildings . . . it would be a miracle if—

In the mere time it took to look, a building loomed. Donal lunged forward, The platform twisted, caught the edge of a cornice bounded outward. There was only time to hurl himself across Kathri's body, with arms outflung.

There came a rending of metal, a spray of shattered stone, and Donal knew nothing more except a sudden shock of darkness.

## V

Slowly, his mental self struggled up. He knew it couldn't have been long. His head was resting in Kathri's lap, and she was slapping his face rhythmically—sharp stinging blows.

" That's enough," he gasped. There were no broken bones, just a mass of bruises, and Kathri also carried a large bruise above the temple. " The miracle did happen," he muttered, and glanced quickly overhead. " No sign of the other platforms ?"

" No—but they may have landed !" Kathri was climbing back through the tangled wreckage. She emerged again, with both the rifles. They stood looking around, and after a moment Donal recognized the street.

" Listen ! "

The sound of rifle fire reached them. Not isolated shots now, but entire volleys. A moment of silence and again the volleys came—just a few streets away, Donal thought.

" They landed all right," he said grimly. " Tanner's in trouble !"

They raced toward the sound of the battle. The firing came louder now, but more sporadic. " This way !" Donal plunged toward a cross-street which led into the area. Every movement of his bruised limbs was an agony. Now the firing had stopped altogether, as an ominous silence settled over the streets. *They're only digging in*, Donal thought. *Tanner knows how to manoeuvre*— But a terrible doubt settled on him.

Minutes later they were on the scene. Donal came to a halt, stumbling and gasping, as the havoc met his eyes.

Three of the platforms had landed. From each of them, huge lights threw a ghastly glow about the area. And there were silver men, dozens of them, moving forward grimly as they launched beams from their pronged weapons. Already Donal could see bodies of his men lying in the rubble. Fully a dozen lay there, while the few remaining were dug in behind a shallow barricade.

The rifles opened up again, but they seemed ineffectual. Donal saw two more of his men go down against the pale rays. One of the two was Tanner. He heard Kathri sobbing beside him, but it was a sob of rage. She threw up her rifle and pumped a fusillade at a group of raiders who came in a flanking wide movement. Donal joined her, as fury rose to

choke him. Three times he fired, and he knew he had not missed. But none of the silver men went down !

His mind was a whirling agony. He knew these men could die, but now bullets seemed ineffectual. He stared around dazedly, suddenly realized that he and Kathri were open targets.

" Take cover !" He sprang toward the nearest building, beyond range of those glaring lights.

But already they had been seen. One of the invaders was racing toward them, weapon levelled. Donal whirled and wilted. His gaze was fixed on that strange weapon, and he knew there was only one chance now. If he could gain that weapon—just one of them—

The beam lashed out. In the same instant Donal went to his knees, took careful aim and fired. This time he *knew* he had not missed. The silver man hung poised in mid-air, arms outflung, then ploughed forward at Donal's feet.

Donal seized the pronged weapon, flung his rifle aside. More invaders were coming toward them with long leaping strides, strangely cat-like. Donal sobbed air into his lungs.

" Inside !" He shoved Kathri toward the doorway behind them. He had explored many of these buildings, danger was here too, but inside they might have a chance. If they could reach the upper levels, the roof—

Total darkness assailed them, together with the smell of dust and ancient death. He could hear Kathri stumbling ahead of him.

" Wait !" He fumbled with the weapon, felt a trigger arrangement not unlike a rifle's. There was a warmth beneath his hand as the beam lashed out. He held it only long enough to see the wide stairway off to one side, crumbled and tottering. They must take the chance ; already he could hear footsteps outside, a strange garble of voices.

" Follow me. Stay close !" They mounted upward in darkness and reached the first landing. Trailing fingers across the walls, they turned left and continued the climb.

" Stay close to the wall !" Donal warned.

The silver men had entered from below. Donal could see their beams flashings, searching the lower corridor. Once, a beam sliced tentatively upward.

Kathri's hair was soft against his face, and she trembled, but Donal knew it was more from fear of this place than

anything else ; there had been many tales of the ghastly things found in these buildings.

" If we can reach the roof, Donal ! We can hide out until they go away !"

He gripped her arm fiercely. " When they go away, they'll take all the radiation of the City with them ! You've seen the kind of men they are ! Tanner dead—and the others."

He clung fast to the pronged weapon. Again he peered. The men were still moving around down there, as if determined to seek them out. Donal hesitated, then flashed his beam upward through the stair-well. Three more flights—the stairs seemed fairly intact, save for one narrow section where the stone balustrade had fallen away—

Then disaster struck. Kathri screamed.

Staring up, she had looked directly into the face of a grinning skeleton which hung over the railing above. She staggered back struck the weakened balustrade and sent it crashing downward. Donal pulled her back from the abyss just in time.

" I'm sorry, Donal ! I—"

" No time for that now ! They'll be up here—"

Already beams were lancing upward, searching the walls and landings. And those were more than search beams ! Donal heard the deadly crackling sound as they struck and sprayed outward. He sent his own beam down, saw the lightning leap from wall to stair, saw half a dozen men tumbling back out of range. Then came silence and total darkness.

He pulled Kathri up to the next landing. " Let me have the rifle ! They don't know our position now. Lord, if they'll only hold off a few minutes.—"

He was groping his way toward the stair-well. His hand touched the heavy stone of the balustrade. Using the rifle, he gained leverage against the floor and pried upward. The section moved. Again he tugged as sweat poured into his eyes. Slowly, the entire section began to give way. There came a rending sound, stone tearing against stone—

And suddenly the entire landing came alive with blinding light. He heard Kathri cry out. He caught a glimpse of her, unleashing the weapon against the silvery men who came surging up. With a final desperate heave he sent the balustrade crashing down, and leaped back from the yawning brink. There came a cloud of dust, a roar of plummeting stone, the vision of men hurtling back—then the entire section of stairs below came tearing away to disappear in a tangle of dust and debris.

He whirled back to Kathri. She had fallen, the weapon flung from her grasp. Somehow the light was still blinding. In a split second Donal realized what had happened, as he saw—

*Men on the stairway above him.*

They had landed a platform on the roof.

He leaped for the weapon, but never reached it. A beam touched his neck and fastened there and all of him went tight. He felt a moment of horror. He was falling to his knees. He wanted to curse. The beam at his neck held, and tightened, and there was no pain, only a feeling as if he were sinking into waters of a dark sea.

Silvery men were coming forward as the sea engulfed him.

How long had it been ?

Donal struggled, moved sluggishly—then suddenly he remembered. Terror sliced at his mind. He fought to rise above the terror, and the effort left him weak.

He opened his eyes.

Blinding light. He caught a momentary glimpse of a metal-encased room, oddly shaped, a place where he had never been, He pushed himself to a sitting position and kept his eyes closed until the dizziness went away—then he opened his eyes again.

And immediately wished he hadn't.

Silver men stood about him—crouched, rather, peering close, and he really saw them for the first time. There was something oddly cat-like in their appearance ; soft fur covered their heads, strangely blue-white and aglow, seeming little more than a nimbus. The faces were flat and blunt, mouths a thin gash, no noses visible—but the eyes were something else again. Twice the normal size, and lidless, those eyes seemed to encompass half the face, and they reminded Donal of colourless liquid pools.

But expression was there, a look of intense curiosity as they stared at him. " Curiosity killed the cat," Donal remembered an elder expression, but just now it seemed ominously inapropos. He laughed bitterly from deep in his throat.

Hearing the laugh, one of the men stepped forward and extended a hand. Donal took it gingerly ; it was soft but somehow metallic, and he felt a sinuous strength as the man helped him to his feet.

He saw the others then, and had a hard time believing his eyes. Kathri was there, and Dorthi, Tanner and Loren and

all the others, huddled against the wall of the oddly curving room. Donal moved quickly over to Kathri and put his arms about her.

" What happened ? I was sure our men were dead—I saw it !"

Kathri trembled, and her voice was a whisper. " No, Donal. The weapons only paralyzed—*but they can kill.* We're still in danger, be careful—"

A silver man stepped close, staring at him through lidless eyes. Suddenly Donal came taut and alert. There came a tingling at the nape of his neck. He felt a flow of thought. It lapped gently at first, then penetrated sharply.

" *You are a leader,*" said the thought. " *Admirable, your defence—but doomed to failure from the start. Cunning, your strategy on the stairs—but the type of cunning to be found only in fifth-level races. What in the name of the Unholy Triad*"—the thought sharpened—" *did you expect to gain ?*"

" Our existence !" Donal roared. " That which is the right of all races !"

The silver man smiled mentally. Donal felt his faint amusement.

" *Existence ? Fifteen million trans-secs of outer survey have proved that the right to racial existence is a variable, not a universal.*" A pause, to give Donal time to grasp it. He failed. " *You are a Leader,*" came the thought again. "*Though I cannot understand why, when you have two such as these among you.*" He gestured at Dorthi and Kathri.

Donal struggled for words. " These two are different," he blurted. " They are the first ! It has something to do with—with—" And he found that the ancient Coburn's terms had escaped him.

" *We understand. Much more than you realize. A few of my men are not too well for wear, but fortunately none of us have died ; your weapons have the power to stun us, but they cannot penetrate.*"

Donal's mind was awhirl. He felt his men stirring restlessly behind him, and he realized they hadn't as yet received the thoughts. " Didn't have a chance," Loren was muttering. His gaze was fixed on a rack across the room, where a dozen of the pronged weapons nestled. " Lord ! If we could only get to those, we might still make a—"

It was Dorthi who whirled upon him. " Be quiet, you fool ! Don't you know they can read your minds ?"

" She's right," Donal warned sharply. " Don't any of you make a move ! I think I can talk with this man." He turned back and noticed a thin smile about the other's lips. " How is it possible that I—that you—"

" *The thoughts ? We made a slight adjustment in your thalamic co-ordinates. It was not necessary with these two,*" he gestured at Dorthi and Kathri, " *and that amazes me. It also convinces me that with some training in the cerebral sciences, under proper conditions, the rest of you could be brought to their level.*" V'Naarik paused, frowning. " *But there is a greater problem ! Earthmen—we have here a situation in Solarian Ethics which has not been encountered in the Empire in more than twenty thousand years. It must be solved ! And I must ask that you help me in the solving !*"

Donal stared at this man. Solarian Ethics . . . Empire . . . the terms were strange to him, and " twenty thousand years " staggered his mind. He knew that Kathri had received the thoughts too, and she was frowning. As for Dorthi, she stood calm and unmoving, as if she *knew.*

" I do not understand," Donal said.

" *Then understand this, Earthman. We need the radiations ! All that we can drain from your planet will be just sufficient for our return to Cygni—our home, which is very far away. We need it, and nothing stands in the way of the Empire's needs.*"

Donal understood that, all right. He took an angry step forward. " And we need the City ! Without the radiations we die ! We are not like the Outlanders. If you come with your machines, we will fight ! Many of my people are left—"

V'Naarik gave something like a sigh. The soft fur atop his head took on a bluish glow. Donal fell back ; it was as if a smothering hand had clamped across his thoughts.

" *I have said I need your aid in the solving. Come, Earthman. I wish to show you something.*" V'Naarik stepped cat-like across the room, toward a huge glassite screen. Donal watched suspiciously. There came an ascending whine, and the screen swirled alive.

A dark bluish ball lay before Donal, slowly spinning, filling all the heavens. He could see the vast downward curve of its bulk. He could see blackness beyond, tinged with a faint aura of sunlight.

"*It is Earth. Your planet,*" came V'Naarik's thought. "*We lie a thousand miles above. Beautiful? But watch.*"

The screen blurred and shifted. Then the vision of the void leaped forward to smash against Donal's eyes, hungry infinity and beseeching stars. There were hundreds of times more stars than he had ever seen on the clearest night!

"*Our home lies out there,*" V'Naarik gestured. "*Much—much farther than you can see. I have said that we have a problem, Earthman. It has become your problem as well, and I must ask that you help!*"

"Help?" Donal muttered. He turned and saw that Dorthi was watching him, silent and uncommunicative. He turned to Kathri, and she pressed her hand tightly into his own. "Help? How can we be of help to such as you?"

"*It is against all principles of Empire to wantonly destroy. Particularly among sub-species which show evidences of latent potential—and we are not at all convinced that your kind should remain at mere fifth-level cultural status. I think I have the solution—but I cannot ethically employ it against your wishes! That is where you must help.*"

He paused, to make sure Donal understood. Then he waved at the screen.

"*Out there, near Cygni—in Fourth Sector Temporal as we've charted it—lies a group of planets. It is part of a double sun system. One of those planets is much like Earth in mass and gravity, with mountains and rolling fields. Would you agree to go there, Earthman—you and your kind?*"

Donal stood stunned, staring into the astra-lens. It had frightened him at first, that vast expanse, the stars all glittering and icy. But strangely now he felt a softness and warmth, the spaces closing in, the stars beseeching.

*Beseeching*! To go out there . . . it would be like some of the stories he had read in the books, those stories which he had thought were for children!

"*It will not be easy, Earthman. It is a raw planet, with much work to do—but it will be* your *planet*! *There will be no need of the radiations there. It needs a people of your agrarian-technical complex. In a way it would be an experiment of great interest to us—we want to help you—but you will be strictly on your own, our ships visiting you perhaps once in fifty years.*"

Donal turned away, scarcely daring to speak. So little time for decision ! His first thought was : but what of our crops this year ? It is almost time for the gathering ! And he thought : what of my pact with Morghan's Group ? I gave my word to Morghan ! Then he laughed aloud. Crops ? Morghan's Outlanders ? What would any of it matter now ? The City and all it contained would belong to Morghan once the radiations were gone.

He turned to V'Naarik. " It is not for me to make the decision ! I must consult with my men. They have families, children ! There are many of us—"

" *We have room for all in your Village. And you shall have the time you need, days if you like, to sit with your Council.*"

Donal consulted with his men. They came crowding around the astra-lens, peering with awe into the outer spaces. It would be a momentous turning—and peace ! When had they ever known peace, or a planet of their own ? For four generations their lives had been synchronized to a slow and ceaseless struggle within the Zone ; their thoughts obsessed with secret and futile envy of those Groups without. Coburn's Scripture? It was becoming a mockery to them all, as it had become to Donal.

Donal talked. He explained it all, and his words were urgent, as the men hung on his every word. But already he knew—he knew—and his heart leaped exultantly within him.

It was night, a week later. With Kathri and Dorthi beside him, Donal walked toward the monstrous ship that lay in the fields just outside the Village. All preparations were over. The Villagers were inside, berthed down and waiting. All books had been carried aboard, together with tools and implements. V'Naarik had aided materially—at Donal's request—selecting and rejecting.

Beyond the rolling plains the City was dark and silent now. It occurred to Donal that soon the Outlanders would be moving in. He and Kathri moved on up the ramp, but Dorthi paused.

" Kathri . . ."

Kathri turned, her face suddenly tragic. She rushed down to clasp her sister in her arms. " No, Dorthi ! No . . ."

But she knew. For two days she had known.

" I will not come, Kathri. I prefer to stay. It is best, don't you see? My future is here, with Earth . . . I want my children born— I could never leave ! But perhaps someday we—or our children—"

V'Naarik appeared in the doorway above. He watched the scene for a moment. " *I did not advise her, Donal. She told me* ! *She is vastly wise, that one, and she has made a great decision. The future of Earth will need her kind.*"

Minutes later, eyes moist, Kathri was hurrying up the ramp. The great door closed behind them, and Donal took her gently in his arms. " She felt it was best, Kathri. V'Naarik thinks so too. She'll be happy here, and the Outlanders will not always be—Outlanders."

Kathri thought of her sister and felt that she should cry. But she also thought of the New Earth beyond the stars, and the green of its fields, with Donal at her side, and there was only a vast singing quiet in her soul that was too deep for tears.

—Henry Hasse

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*Readers who remember Calvin Knox's previous story "Chalice Of Death" in No. 1 will have realised that there had to be a sequel to Hallam Navarre's finding of long lost Earth and the problem of the sleeping humans. So here it is.*

# EARTH SHALL LIVE AGAIN

## by CALVIN M. KNOX

*The prize : Earth. The arena : Jorus.*
*The odds : one man against a planet !*

---

### I.

Coming home to a planet that was not home was a bleak, painful business, Hallam Navarre thought.

The Earthman stood on the concrete landing-apron of the great spaceport of Jorus City, seeing once again the alien blue sun of the planet of his birth. About him, life was going on smoothly and ordinarily. A Dergonian who had travelled with him aboard the liner from Kariad jostled past him, yelling noisily for a porter. Two sleek Kariadi girls, vacationing on Jorus, winked at Navarre and moved on.

He felt the sunlight hot against his bald scalp. For more than a year, it had not been necessary to shave his hair—but now, back on Jorus, it was imperative for him to reassert his status as an Earthman.

Jorus City loomed blurrily three miles away—and towering over all was the massive palace of Joroiran VII, Overlord of Jorus. Navarre smiled. *Some day*, he told himself, thinking of the past year's doing, *an Earthman will rule again in that palace.*

He stood alone in the midst of the crowd, letting the familiar colours and smells of Jorus become part of him again. He wondered just how much had changed, in his year's absence.

One thing was certain : Kausirn, the Overlord's Vegan adviser, had solidified his position with Joroiran. Perhaps, thought Navarre, Kausirn had been making ready against the eventual return of Navarre from his wild quest. He would find out soon.

He hailed a jetcab.

" To the Palace," he said.

The driver shot off toward Jorus City. They took the main highway as far as the Street of the Lords, swung round into Central Plaza, and halted outside the Palace.

" One unit and six," the driver said. Navarre handed the man a bill and two coins and sprang out. He paused for a moment at the approach to the Palace, looking up.

He had been gone a year, searching at the Overlord's command for the semi-mythical Chalice of Death. It had been a fool's errand, arranged by Navarre's rival Kausirn in order to keep the Earthman from court for an indefinite length of time.

But Navarre had found the Chalice, aided by his two comrades, Helna Winstin of Kariad and halfbreed Domrik Carso of Jorus. The legend-shrouded Chalice had been situated on even more legend-shrouded Earth, in the Sol system of Galaxy RGC18347. It had proven to be no less than a crypt containing ten thousand Terran men and women who had slept a hundred thousand years, through the long night of Terra's decline.

Earth now was inhabited by dwarfish descendants of men ; the true Earth-line was scattered through the million worlds of the galaxy. But Navarre had planned wisely. Six thousand of his reborn Earthmen he had left on Earth, instructing them only to marry and bring forth children. The remaining two thousand couples he had transported to the neighbour system of Procyon.

The years would pass, and children would be born, and children's children. And a restored race of Earthmen would

spring up to reunite their shattered empire of thirty thousand years before.

Navarre smiled. If only he could keep his plan a secret for a few years, until they were ready . . .

Well, he would manage. But he was apprehensive about the reception he would get in the Overlord's Palace.

The place hadn't changed much physically. There were still the accursed fifty-two steps to climb, still the black-walled corridor, guarded by bland monoptics from Triz. But he became conscious of the first change when he reached the Trizians.

He shucked back the hood that covered his scalp, and, thus revealed, started to go past. But one of the Trizians thrust out a horny palm and said, in a dull monotone, " Stop."

Navarre glared up angrily. " Have I been forgotten so quickly ?"

" State your name and purpose here, Earthman."

" I'm Hallam Navarre, Earthman to the Court. I've just returned from a long mission on behalf of His Majesty. I want to see him."

" Wait here," the Trizian said. " I'll check within."

The monoptic vanished down the corridor, while his companion rigidly blocked Navarre's path. He realised that these two must be new to the palace : the previous Trizians had always recognised him and given him admittance without question.

He waited impatiently. After a few moments the Trizian returned, followed by two armed members of the Overlord's personal guard—Daborians, tusked, vicious-looking seven-footers.

" Well ?" Navarre demanded.

" I was unable to reach His Majesty. But the Lord Adviser wishes you brought to him for interrogation."

Navarre tensed. The Lord Adviser, eh ? Undoubtedly Kausirn ; the Vegan had coined a shiny new title for himself in Navarre's absence.

" Very well," he said. " Take me to the Lord Adviser."

Kausirn was sitting behind a desk about ten feet wide, in a luxuriously-appointed office one floor beneath the main throne room. His pale, ascetic face looked waxier than ever —a sign of health among the Vegans, Navarre knew. He sat

hunched forward, his astonishing nest of fingers twined together before him.

The Daborian guards at either side of Navarre nudged him roughly. " Kneel in the presence of the Lord Adviser, Earthman !"

" That'll be all right," Kausirn said stiffly. He gestured dismissal to the guards with one dizzying wave of a ten-fingered hand. " Hello, Navarre. I hadn't expected to be seeing you so soon."

" Nor I you, Kausirn. Or is it *milord* I should address you as ?"

The Vegan smiled apologetically. " In your absence, Navarre, we thought it wise—the Overlord did, I mean—to consolidate your post and mine into one more lofty rank, and so the office of the Lord Adviser was created. Joroiran handles little of the tiresome routine of state now, by the way. He spends his days in contemplation and profound study."

That was a flat lie, Navarre thought. If ever a man were less fitted for a life of contemplation and profound study, that man was Joroiran VII, Overlord of Jorus. Aloud he said, " I suppose you'll be happy to have some of the governmental burden lifted from your shoulders, Kausirn. I mean, now that I'm back."

Kausirn sighed and inspected his multitude of fingers. "This must yet be decided, Navarre."

" What ?"

" The workings of our government have been quite smooth in your absence. Perhaps His Majesty will not see his way clear to restoring you to your past eminence—inasmuch as you failed to bring him that which he sent you forth to find. I speak of the Chalice, of course—and the immortality he so desires."

" And what makes you so sure I failed to find the Chalice?" Navarre asked bluntly. " How do *you* know ?"

Kausirn smiled faintly. " Obviously you were not successful. The Chalice is a myth—as both you and I knew before you undertook your little pleasure-cruise around the universe." He leaned forward, eyes narrowing. " Besides, if you *had* found the Chalice—would you bring it back for Joroiran, Earthman ? You'd keep it for yourself !"

" As you say, Kausirn, I found no Chalice for His Majesty. Still, I don't doubt but that he'll welcome me back to his

service. The Overlords of Jorus have always found the advice of an Earthman useful."

Stern coldness replaced the mocking warmth in Kausirn's eyes. " He has no need of you, Navarre."

" Let *him* tell me that. I demand to see him !"

" Today is Fourday," Kausirn said. " His Majesty holds public audience on Threeday, as you should well be aware . . . unless you've forgotten. I suggest you return next week. If fate should fall upon you, you'll have ample chance to plead your case before His Majesty and myself at that time."

Unbelievingly Navarre said, " You *forbid* me to see him ? You want me to come like a commoner to seek his ear at a public audience ? You're mad, Kausirn !"

The Vegan shrugged humbly. " His Majesty is deep in meditation. I wouldn't dare break in on his contemplations . . . particularly since he told me only last week that government was much simpler for him now that he had but one adviser. You seem to be superfluous, Navarre."

The alien had done his job well, Navarre thought grimly. He started forward. " I'll see Joroiran with or without your word, Vegan ! I don't need—"

Kausirn's fingers flickered almost imperceptibly. Suddenly Navarre felt Daborian hands clutch each of his arms. He was drawn backward, away from the Vegan.

Boxed in ! Betrayed at every turn, sewed up neatly by the scheming Vegan. Navarre began to wish he had never let Carso talk him into returning to Jorus. The halfbreed had been damnably persuasive in his arguing, though.

" Take the Earthman out of the Palace," Kausirn commanded. " And don't let him back in."

There was no sense in resisting ; these Daborians would cheerfully break his arms at the first sign of struggle. Navarre scowled at the Vegan and let himself be hustled out of the Lord Adviser's office and up the stairs.

End of plan one, Navarre thought bitterly as he sat in the plaza facing the Palace.

He had hoped to regain his old position as Joroiran's right-hand adviser, with the eventual intention of making use of the Joran fleet as the nucleus of the reborn Terran space navy. But Kausirn had moved swiftly and well, pushing Navarre out of influence completely.

He had to gain the ear of the Overlord. But how, if Kausirn governed all approaches ?

Navarre wished Carso were here. But the stocky, bearded halfbreed was still under sentence of banishment, officially, and had remained in the neighbouring system of Kariad, awaiting word from Navarre. And any word he might get from Navarre now would be far from cheerful.

He looked up as a vendor came by, hawking confections.

" One for you, Sir Earthman ? A sweet puff, perhaps ? A lemon-tart ?"

Navarre shook his head. " Sorry, old one. I don't crave sweets now."

He glanced down at his shoes, but the old vendor did not go away. He remained before Navarre, peering intently in deep interest.

Exasperated Navarre said, " I told you I don't want anything. *Will* you go away, now ?"

" You are Hallam Navarre," the old man said softly, ignoring the Earthman's impatient outburst. " Returned at last !" The vendor dropped down on the bench alongside Navarre. " For weeks I have tried to see the Vegan Kausirn, to plead my case, and have been turned away. But now you have come back to Jorus, and justice with you !"

Navarre eyed the old man curiously. " You have a suit to place before the Overlord ?"

" Nine weeks I have come to the Palace on Threeday, and been passed over each time. I try to speak to the Vegan in private, to ask him to consider my plea—I am ignored ! But now—"

Navarre held up one hand and said, " My help would be doubtful at the moment. I have my own troubles with the Vegan."

" No !" The old man went popeyed with astonishment. " Even you—the many-fingered one weaves a tight web, then. I fear for Jorus, Earthman. We see little of the Overlord, and Kausirn signs most royal proclamations. I had hoped, seeing you—"

" Not a word of this to anyone," Navarre cautioned. " I have a private audience with Joroiran later this day. Perhaps things will improve after that."

" I hope so," the vendor said fervently. " And then will

you hear my suit? My name is Molko of Dorvil Street. Will you remember me?"

"Of course."

Navarre rose and began to stroll back toward the Palace. So even the people were discontent and unhappy over the role the Vegan played in governing Jorus? Perhaps, Navarre thought, he could turn that to some advantage.

As for the "private audience with Joroiran" he had just invented, possibly that could be brought about after all. Navarre pulled up his hood, shielding his bald scalp from view, and walked more briskly to the Palace.

## II

Seven generations of Navarres had served seven generations of the Joroiran Overlords of Jorus. The relationship traced backward three hundred years, to brave Joroiran I—who, with Voight Navarre at his side, had cut his empire from the decaying carcass of the festering Starking's League that had succeeded Earth's galactic empire.

The Joroiran strain had weakened, evidently; the seventh of the line had been persuaded by an opportunistic Vegan to do without Earth advice. And so Navarre had been sent forth on the quest of the Chalice. But he knew he could use his seventh-generation familiarity with the Palace surroundings to find his way back in.

Once Earth's empire had spanned the galaxy; then the billion-parsec domain had collapsed of its own mighty weight, Earth forgotten, her people reduced to a bare few million scattered on almost as many worlds—retaining their sense of identity with lost Earth even though they knew not where the ancestral planet was.

Navarre had found lost Earth. Given time, he would re-establish Earth's empire in the stars. But now—

Hooded, cowled, deliberately rounding his shoulders, he shuffled forward down the flowered path to the service entrance of the Overlord's Palace.

Even the service entrance was magnificent, he thought. A high, arching vault of black stone it was, with a glittering red burnished metal door set in its heart. Bowed diffidently, Navarre touched the entrance-buzzer, then drew back his hand in mock fright. A televisor system within was, he knew,

spying on him ; he had put the practice into operation himself to ward off assassins.

A window in the door pivoted upward ; a cold Joran face appeared—an unfamiliar face. " Yes ?"

" I am expected within." Navarre constricted his throat, making his voice little more than a choked whisper. " I am the vendor of sweets to His Majesty, Molko of Dorvil Street. I would see the Royal Purchase Officer."

" Hmm. Well enough," the guard grunted. " You can come in."

The burnished door hoisted. Navarre groaned complainingly and moved forward as if his legs were rotted by extreme age.

" Get a move on, old man !"

" I'm coming . . . patience, please ! Patience !"

The door clanged down hard behind him. He pulled his cowl down tighter around his ears. The Purchasing Office was on the third level, two flights upward, and the lift-shaft was not far ahead.

" I know the way," he said to the guard. " You needn't help me."

He reached the liftshaft, stepped in, and quickly pressed the second floor button. A moment later he nudged the stud marked 3.

The liftshaft door slid noiselessly shut ; the tube rose and stopped at the second level. Navarre stepped out, stepped back in, and pressed 7.

Knowing the system was an immeasurable advantage. The stops of the liftshaft could be monitored from the first level ; thus, if the old vendor were to claim to be going to 3 and should go to 7 instead—the Overlord's floor—there would be cause for immediate suspicion. He had carefully thrown confusion behind him, now. There was no certain way of knowing who had or had not entered the liftshaft on the second level.

He waited patiently while the door opened and shut on third level ; then it was up—to the seventh.

Navarre emerged, shuffling wearily along. He knew precisely where Joroiran's private study was located, and, more, he knew precisely how to get there. He counted his steps . . . eleven, twelve, thirteen. He paused thirteen steps from the liftshaft, leaned against the wall, waited.

Counterweighted balances sighed softly and the wall swung open, offering a crevice perhaps wide enough for a cat. Navarre was taking no chances. He squeezed through and kicked the counterweight, sealing the corridor wall again.

Now he found himself in an inner corridor. A televisor screen cast an invisible defensive web across the hall, but again Navarre had the benefit of having devised the system ; he neatly extracted a fuse from a concealed panel in the dark stone of the corridor wall, and walked ahead in confidence.

Joroiran's study door was unmarked by letter or number. Again, Navarre's doing. He huddled deep into his robes, listened carefully for any sound of conversation coming from within, and, hearing none, knocked three times, then once, then once again. It was a signal he had used with the Overlord for years.

Silence for a moment. Then : " Who's there ?" in the hesitant, high-pitched voice of the Overlord.

" Are you alone, Majesty ?"

Through the door came the impatient reply : " Who are you to ask questions of me ? Speak up or I'll summon the guards to deal with you !"

It was Joroiran in his most typically blustery mood ; that probably indicated he was alone. Speaking in his natural voice Navarre said, " Know you not this knock, Majesty ?"

He knocked again.

Suspiciously, from within : " Is this a joke ?"

" No, Majesty. I have come back." He threw back his hood and let Joroiran's televisors pick up his face and shaven scalp.

After a moment the door opened perhaps half an inch. " *Navarre* !" came the whisper from within. The opening widened—and Navarre found himself face to face with his sovereign, Joroiran VII of Jorus.

The year had changed Joroiran, Navarre saw. The Overlord wore a shabby grey lounging-robe instead of his garments of state ; without the elaborate strutwork that puffed out his frame when he appeared in public, he looked vaguely ratlike, a little bit of a man who had been thrust into a vast job by some accident of birth.

His eyes were ringed with dark shadows ; his cheeks were hollower than Navarre remembered them as having been. He

said, " Hello, Navarre," in a tired, husky voice that had none of the one-time splendour of an Overlord.

" I'm happy to be back, sire. My journey was a long and tiring one. I hope I didn't disturb your meditations by coming to you this way—"

" Of course not."

" Oh, Kausirn said you were too busy to be seen now." Navarre chose his words carefully. " He told me you regarded me as superfluous."

Joroiran frowned. " I don't recall your name having come up in discussion for the better part of a year," he said. " I recall no such decision. You've always been a valuable adjunct to the Court." The sudden pose of regality slipped away abruptly, and in a tired voice the Overlord said, " But then what I recall doesn't matter. Navarre, I should never have sent you from the court."

Despite himself, Navarre felt pity for the defeated-looking monarch. Evidently Kausirn had usurped more of the Overlord's power than Navarre had suspected.

" A year has passed since last I was here," said Navarre. " In that time—"

" In that time," Joroiran said mournfully, " Kausirn has taken increasing responsibility on himself. About my only remaining official duty is to hold the Threeday audiences—and were it not for public opinion, he'd soon be doing that himself."

Navarre's face took on an expression of shock. " You mean, sire, that he has taken advantage of my absence to seize some of your power ?"

" Navarre, I'm little more than a prisoner in the Palace these days."

" He said you spent your time meditating, in serious contemplation," Navarre began.

" I ?" Joroiran pointed to the endless rows of books, costly-bound volumes of great scarcity gathered by his father and his book-loving grandfather. " You know as well as I, Navarre, that I never touch these books. I stare at them day after day. They haunt me. They haunt me with their memories of the past—of Overlords who ruled, and were not ruled themselves." Joroiran flushed. " But I talk on too much, and perhaps I overestimate Kausirn's powers. I sent you on a mission. What of it ?" Anticipation gleamed in the Overlord's sallow face.

" Failed," Navarre said bluntly, at once.

" Failed ?"

" The Chalice is a hoax, a legend, a will-of-the-wisp. For a year I pursued it, searching trail after trail, always finding nothing but dreams and phantasms at the end. After a year of this I decided I could be of better use to your Majesty here on Jorus. I returned—and found *this*."

Joroiran's face was bleak. " I had hoped . . . perhaps . . . you might find the Chalice. But to live forever ? Why ? For what, now that . . ." He shook his head. " But you have come back. Perhaps things will change."

Impulsively Navarre seized the Overlord's hand. " I feared Kausirn's encroachments, but there was no way of pointing out the way of things to your Majesty a year ago. Now that I have returned and the pattern of events is clearer, I can help you. You let Kausirn poison your mind against me."

" A fool's error," Joroiran exclaimed.

" But not of permanent harm. The Vegan certainly will not be able to defy you openly once you restore me to your side—and together we can thrust him down."

Joroiran smiled. " Navarre you'll be rewarded for this. I—"

The sudden sound of clicking relays made Navarre whirl. He spun to see the Overlord's door fly open. Kausirn stepped into the chamber.

" Away from that traitor, sire !"

Navarre stared into the snout of a sturdy blaster held firmly in the Vegan's polydactylous hand.

" For how long has the Vegan held the right of unannounced access to your Majesty's chambers, sire ?" Navarre asked angrily.

Joroiran shrugged. " He insisted on it—as a safety move, he said."

Kausirn strode quickly forward and ordered Navarre to one side with a brusque gesture. Navarre obeyed ; it was obvious Kausirn would relish an opportunity of using that blaster.

Suddenly Joroiran drew himself up and said, " Why the gun, Kausirn ? This is most unseemly. Navarre is your fellow adviser as of this moment, and I won't tolerate your uncivil behaviour in here."

*Good for him*, Navarre thought, smiling inwardly. He had succeeded in winning Joroiran over, then. But would it matter, with Kausirn armed?

Turning, the Vegan chuckled gravely. "I mean no disrespect, sire. This man is a deadly enemy of us all. He schemes not only your death but the conquest of the Cluster and of all the galaxy."

"Have you gone mad?" Joroiran demanded. "Navarre is loyal to me and always has been! Put down that weapon, Kausirn! Put it down!"

"Navarre is loyal but to himself," said the Vegan. "I took the liberty of listening outside your Majesty's door for some moments. He told you, did he not, that he had failed to find the Chalice?"

"He told me that," Joroiran admitted. "What of it? The Chalice is a mere legend. It was foolish of me to send him chasing it. Had I not listened to you—"

"*The Chalice exists*," said the Vegan tightly. "*And Navarre would use it as a weapon against you.*"

"He's mad," Navarre said. "I spent a year tracing the Chalice and found nothing but false trails. It was all a trick of yours to get me from Jorus, but—"

"Silence," the Vegan ordered. "Majesty, the Chalice is a crypt, located on the ancient planet Earth. It contained ten thousand sleepers—men and women of Earth, suspended since the days of Earth's empire. I tell you Navarre has wakened these sleepers and plans to make them the nucleus of a re-established Terran empire. He intends the destruction of Jorus and all other worlds that stand in his way."

Dumbstruck, Navarre had to fight to keep his mouth from sagging open in astonishment. How could Kausirn *possibly* know—?

"This is incredible," Navarre said. "Sleepers, indeed! Sire, I ask you—"

"There is no need for discussion," said Kausirn. "I have the proof with me." He drew a gleaming plastic message-cube from his tunic pocket and handed it to the Overlord. "Play this, sire. Then judge who betrays you and who seeks your welfare."

Taking the cube, Joroiran stepped aside and converted it to playback. Navarre strained his ears but was unable to

pick up more than faint murmurs. When it was over, the ruler returned, glaring bitterly at Navarre.

" I hardly know which of you to trust less," he said somberly. " You, Kausirn, who have made a figurehead of me—or *you*, Navarre." He scowled. " Earthman, you came in here with sweet words—but I see from this cube that every word was a lie. You would help overthrow Kausirn only to place yourself in command. I never expected treachery from you, Navarre."

He turned to Kausirn. " Take him away," he ordered. " Have him killed. And do something about these ten thousand awakened Earthmen. Send a fleet to Earth to destroy them." Joroiran sounded near tears ; he seemed to be choking back bitter sobs before each word. " And leave me alone. I don't want to see you any more today, Kausirn. Go run Jorus, and let me weep."

The little monarch looked from Kausirn to the stunned Earthman. " You are both betrayers. But at least Kausirn will let me have the pretence of ruling. Go. Away !"

" At once, sire," said the Vegan unctuously. He jabbed the blaster in Navarre's ribs. " Come with me, Earthman. The Overlord wishes privacy."

## III

The lower depths of the Overlord's Palace were damp and musty—intentionally so, to increase a prisoner's discomfort. Navarre huddled moodily in a cell crusted with wall-lichens, listening to the steady pacing of the massive Daborian guard outside.

Not even Kausirn had cared to kill him in cold blood. Navarre hadn't expected mercy from the Vegan, but evidently Kausirn wished to observe the legal forms. There would be a public trial, its outcome carefully predetermined and its course well rehearsed, followed by Navarre's degradation and execution.

It made sense. A less devious planner than Kausirn might have gunned Navarre down in a dark alcove of the Palace and thereby rid himself of one dangerous enemy. But by the public exposure of Navarre's infamy, Kausirn would not only achieve the same end but also cast discredit on the entire line of Earthmen—a line still somewhat in favour among the people of Jorus.

Navarre cradled his head in his hands, feeling the tiny stubbles of upshooting hair. For a year, he had let his hair grow—the year he had spent in the distant galaxy of Earth and Procyon, where the ways of galactic culture had been left behind, where he was under no compulsion to display the universal trademark of the Earthman. His hair, thick, dark-brown, had sprouted. Helna Winstin, the female Earthman from Kariad—her hair had been red. And Domrik Carso had issued forth with a flax-yellow that contrasted curiously with his rich brown beard.

But at the end of the year when the seeding of Procyon was done and already half a thousand new Earthmen had been born, Helna and Carso and Navarre had come together, and it had been decided that they should return to the main galaxy.

" It's best," Carso had growled. " You stay away too long, it's possible Joroiran may decide to trace you. You never can tell. If we remain here, we may draw suspicion to our project. We'll go back."

Helna had agreed. " I'll return to Kariad, you to Jorus. We can return to the confidences of our masters ; perhaps we can turn that to some use in the days to come."

Navarre remembered that he had been reluctant to leave Earth, where the air was fresh and clean and he could walk freely with unshaven scalp. But finally he had agreed. Leaving Helna and Carso on Kariad—for Carso, under sentence of banishment from Jorus feared to re-enter without permission —Navarre had come back.

And been trapped.

He wondered how Kausirn had found out his plans, how he had known that a new race of Earthmen was growing in Galaxy RGC18347. It was too accurate to be a guess. Had they been followed this past year ? Kausirn's assassins had nearly finished Carso and Navarre at the beginning of their quest ; perhaps that had just been a blind.

Somehow his ten thousand would have to be warned. But first—escape.

He squinted through the murk at the Daborian guard who paced without. Daborians were fierce warriors, thought Navarre, but not overlong on brains. He eyed the tusked one's bulk appreciatively.

" Ho, old one, your teeth rot in your head !"

" Quiet, Sir Earthman. You are not to speak."

" Am I to take orders from a mouldering corpse of a warrior ?" Navarre snapped waspishly. " Fie, old one. You frighten me not."

" I am ordered not to speak with you."

" For fear I'd befuddle your slender brain and escape, eh ? Milord Kausirn has a low opinion of your kind, I fear. I remember him saying of old that your usefulness ends at the neck. Not so, moldy one ?"

The Daborian whirled and peered angrily into Navarre's cell. His polished tusks glinted brightly. Navarre put a hand between the bars and tugged at the alien's painstakingly-combed beard. The Daborian howled.

" It surprises me the beard did not come off in my hand," Navarre said.

" Goad me not," muttered the Daborian. Navarre saw his jailer was approaching the boiling-point.

" Is it not true," asked Navarre, " that on Dabor a tuskless one such as you would be used as a kitchen-scull rather than a warrior ?"

The Daborian grunted and jabbed his fist through the bars ; Navarre laughed, dancing lightly back. He offered three choice curses from the safety of the rear of his cell.

The Daborian, he knew, could rend him into quivering chunks if he ever got close enough. But that was not going to happen. Navarre stationed himself perhaps a yard from the bars and continued to rail at the guard.

Maddened, the Daborian reversed his gun and hammered at Navarre with its butt. The first wild swing came within an inch of laying open the Earthman's skull ; on the second, Navarre seized the butt and tugged with sudden strength. He dragged it halfway from the guard's grasp, just enough to get his own hands on the firing stud.

The bewildered Daborian yelled just once before Navarre dissolved his face. A second blast finished off the electronic lock that sealed shut the cell.

Fifteen minutes later Navarre returned to the warm sunlight, a free man, in the garb of a Daborian guard.

Verru, the wigmaker of Dombril Street, was a pale, wizened little old Joran who blinked seven or eight times as the stranger slipped into his shop, locking the door behind him and holding a finger to his lips for silence.

Wordlessly, Navarre slipped behind the counter, grasped the wigmaker's arm, and drew him back through the arras into his stockroom. There he said, " Sorry for the mystery, wigmaker. I feel the need for your services."

" You . . . are not a Daborian !"

" The face belies the uniform," Navarre said. He grinned, showing neat, even teeth. " My tusks do not meet the qualifications. Nor my scalp." He lifted his borrowed cap.

Verru's eyes widened. " An *Earthman* ?"

" Indeed. I'm looking for a wig for—ah—a masquerade. Have you anything Kariadi in style ?"

The trembling wigmaker said, " One moment." He bustled through a score or more of boxes before producing a glossy black headpiece. " Here !"

" Affix it for me," Navarre said.

Sighing, the wigmaker led him to a mirrored alcove and sealed the wig to his scalp. Navarre examined his reflection approvingly. In all but colour, he might pass for a man of Kariad.

" Well done," he said. Reaching below his uniform for his money-pouch, he produced two green bills of Imperial scrip. One he handed to the wigmaker, saying, " This is for you. As for the other—go into the street and wait there until a Kariadi about my size comes past. Then entice him somehow into your store, making use of the money."

" This is very irregular. Why must I do these things, Sir Earthman ?"

" Because else I'll have you flayed. Now go !"

The wigmaker went. Navarre took up a station behind the shopkeeper's door, clutching his gun tightly, and waited.

Five minutes passed. Then he heard the wigmaker's voice outside, tremulous, unhappy.

" I beg you friend. Step within my shop a while."

" Sorry, wigmaker. No need for your trade have I."

" Good sir, I ask it as a favour. I—have an order for a wig styled in your fashion. No, don't leave. I can make it worthwhile. Here. This will be yours if you'll let me sketch your hair-style. It will be but a moment's work . . ."

Navarre grinned. The wigmaker was shrewd.

" If it's only a moment, then. I guess it's worth a hundred units to me if you like my hair-style."

The door opened. Navarre drew back, let the wigmaker enter. He was followed by a Kariadi of about Navarre's size and build. Navarre brought his gun-butt down with stunning force on the back of the Kariadi's head, and caught him as he fell.

" These crimes in my shop, Sir Earthman—"

" Are in the name of the Overlord," Navarre told the quivering wigmaker. He knelt over the unconscious Kariadi and began to strip away his clothing. " Lock your door," he ordered. " And get out your blue dyes. I have more work for you."

The job was done in thirty minutes. The Kariadi, by this time awake and angry, lay bound and gagged in the wigmaker's stockroom, clad in the oversize uniform of Joroiran's Daborian guard. Navarre, a fine Kariadi blue from forehead to toes, and topped with a shining mop of black Kariadi hair, grinned at the grunting prisoner.

" You serve a noble cause, my friend. It was too bad you had to be treated so basely."

" *Mmph* ! *Mgggl* ! "

" Hush," Navarre whispered. He examined his image in the wigmaker's mirror. Resplendent in a tight-fitting Kariadi tunic, he scarcely recognized himself. He drew forth the Kariadi's wallet and extracted his money, including the hundred-unit Joran note the wigmaker had given him.

" Here," he said, stuffing the wad of bills under the Kariadi's leg. " I seek only your identity, not your cash." He added another hundred-unit note to the wad, gave yet another to the wigmaker, and said, " You will be watched. If you free him before an hour has elapsed, I'll have you flayed in Central Plaza."

" I'll keep him a month, Sir Earthman, if you command it." The wigmaker was green with fright.

" An hour will be sufficient, Verru. And a thousand thanks for your help in this matter." Giving the panicky old man a noble salute, Navarre adjusted his cape, unlocked the shop-door, and stepped out into the street.

He hailed a passing jetcab.

" Take me to the spaceport," he said, in a Kariadi accent.

As he suspected, Kausirn had posted guards at the space-port. He was stopped by a pair of sleek Joran secret-service men—he recognized the tiny emblem at their throats, having

designed it himself in a time when he was more in favour on Jorus—and was asked to produce his papers.

He offered the passport he had taken from the Kariadi. They gave it a routine look-through and handed it back.

" How come the checkup ?" he asked. " Someone back there said you were looking for a prisoner who escaped from the Overlord's jail. Any truth in that ?"

" Where'd you hear that ?"

Navarre shrugged innocently. " He was standing near the refreshment dials. Curious-looking fellow—he wore a hood, and kept his face turned away from me. Said the Overlord had captured some hot-shot criminal, or maybe it was an assassin, but he got away. Say, are Jorus' dungeons so easily unsealed ?"

The secret-service men exchanged glances. " What colour was this fellow ?"

" Why, he was pink—like you Jorans. Or maybe he was an Earthman. He might have been bald under that hood, y'know. And I couldn't see his eyes. But he may still be there, if you're interested."

" We are. Thanks."

Navarre grinned wryly and moved on toward the ticket-booths as the secret-service men scooted off in the direction of the refreshment dials. He hoped they would have a merry time searching through the crowd.

Having passed the police screen, he entered the ticket-booths, reached a stat, and punched out his destination, Kariad. He slid his passport and a hundred-unit note into the slot and waited ; moments later there came a ticket entitling him to one-way passage on the royal liner *Pride of Jorus*, along with his passport and a few demi-units in change.

He gathered up money and papers and ticket and stepped through the gate toward the field itself. Looking back, he saw secret-service agents busily buttonholing people here and there in the line.

*Kausirn is probably nibbling his multitude of fingers to the bone*, Navarre thought. But the fact that he was effecting a successful escape afforded him little joy. The Vegan knew of his plans, now—and the fledgling colonies of Earthmen in Galaxy RGC 18347 were in great danger.

He boarded the liner, cradled in, and awaited blastoff impatiently, consuming time by silently practising the irregular Kariadi verbs.

## IV

Customs-check was swift and simple on Kariad. The Kariadi customs officers paid little attention to their own nationals ; it was outworlders they kept watch for. Navarre merely handed over his passport, made out in the name of Melwod Finst, and nodded to the customs official's two or three brief questions. Since he had no baggage, he obviously had nothing to declare.

He moved on, into the spaceport. It was late afternoon on Kariad ; Secundus, the yellow main-sequence sun of the double system, was high, while red giant Primus lay flattened at the horizon. Navarre had always thought it wasteful that a one-planet system should have two suns. The double stars together cast an almost purple glow, bordering on brown.

The money-changing booths lay straight ahead. He joined the line, reaching the slot twenty minutes later. He drew forth his remaining Joran money, some six hundred units, and fed it to the machine. Conversion was automatic ; the changer clicked twice and spewed eight hundred and three Kariadi credit bills back at him. He folded them into his wallet and moved on. There was no indication of pursuit this time.

He recalled his last trip to Kariad. Then, he and Carso had been chased by two assassins sent by Kausirn. Passing the weapons shop where they had eluded their pursuers, Navarre glanced up at the arcade roof ; there was no sign of the damage that had been done earlier.

Deliberately he walked on through the crowded arcades for ten minutes more. Then, all seeming clear, he stepped into a public communicator booth, inserted a coin, and requested information.

The directory-robot grinned impersonally at him. " Yours to serve, good sir."

" I want the number of Helna Winstin, Earthman to the Court of Lord Marhaill."

His coins came clicking back. The robot said, after the moment's pause necessary to fish the data from its sponge-platinum memory banks, " Four-oh-three-oh-six-K."

Quickly Navarre punched out the number. On the screen appeared a diamond-shaped insignia framing an elaborate scrollwork M. A female voice said, " Lord Marhaill's. With whom would you speak.?"

" Helna Winstin. The Earthman to the Court."

" And who calls her ?"

" Melwod Finst. I'm but newly returned from Jorus."

After a pause the Oligocrat's emblem dissolved. Helna Winstin's head and shoulders appeared on the screen. She looked outward at Navarre cautiously. Her face was pale, with sharp-rising cheekbones. She seemed to have shaved her scalp not long before.

" Milady, I am Melwod Finst of Kariad West. I crave a private audience with you at once."

" You'll have to make regular application. I'm very busy just now. You—"

Her eyes widened as the supposed Finst tugged at his foremost lock of hair, yanking it away from his scalp far enough to show where the blue skin colour ended and where the pale white began. He replaced the lock, pressing it down to rebond it to his scalp, and grinned. The grin was unmistakable.

" I have serious matters to discuss with you, milady," Navarre said. " My—seedling farm—is in serious danger. The crop is threatened by hostile ones. This concerns you, I believe."

She nodded. " I believe it does. Let us arrange an immediate meeting, Melwod Finst."

They met at the Two Suns, a refreshment-place not too far from the spaceport. Navarre, unfamiliar with Kariad, was not anxious to travel any great distance to meet Helna ; since he was posing as an ostensible Kariadi, any undue lack of familiarity with his native world might seem suspicious.

He arrived at the place long before she did. They had arranged that he was to find her, not she him ; not seeing her at any of the tables, he took a seat at the bar.

" Rum," he said. He knew better than to order the vile Kariadi beer.

He sat alone, nursing his drink, grunting noncommittally any time a local barfly attempted to engage him in conversation. Thirty minutes and three rums later, Helna arrived. She paused just inside the door of the place, standing regally erect, looking round.

Navarre slipped away from the bar and went up to her.

" Milady ?"

She glanced inquisitively at him.

" I am Melwod Finst," he told her gravely. " Newly come from Jorus."

He led her to a table in the back, drew a coin from his pocket, and purchased thirty minutes of privacy. The dull blue of the force-screen sprang up around them. During the next half hour they could carouse undisturbed, or make love, or plot the destruction of the galaxy.

Helna said, " Why the disguise? Where have you been? What—"

" One question at a time, Helna. The disguise I needed in order to get off Jorus. My old rival Kausirn has placed me under sentence of death."

" How can he?"

" Because he knows our plan, and has painted me to Joroiran as a black villain."

" Which you are, of course."

" True. But they should never have found out. Kaisirn's spies are more ingenious than we think. I heard him tell the Overlord everything—where we were, the secret of the Chalice, our eventual hope of restoring Earth's empire."

" You denied it, of course?"

" I said it was madness. But he had some sort of documentary evidence he gave the Overlord, and Joroiran was immediately convinced. Just after I had won him over, too." He scowled. " I managed to escape and flee here in this guise, but we'll have to block them before they send a fleet out to eradicate the settlements on Earth and Procyon. Where's Carso?"

Helna shrugged. " He has taken cheap lodgings somewhere in the heart of the city, while waiting for word from you that his banishment is revoked. I see little of him these days."

" Small chance he'll get unbanished now," Navarre said. " Let's find him. The three of us will have to decide what's to be done."

He rose. Helna caught him by one wrist and gently tugged him back into his seat.

" Is the emergency so pressing?"

" Well—"

" We have twenty minutes more of privacy paid for; should we waste it? I haven't seen you in a month, Hallam."

" I guess twenty minutes won't matter much," he said, grinning.

They found Carso later that day, sitting in a bar in downtown Kariad City, clutching a mug of Kariadi beer in his hand. The half-breed looked soiled and puffy-faced; his scalp was several days dark with hair, his bushy beard untrimmed and unkept.

He looked up in sudden alarm as Helna's hand brushed lightly along his shoulder. "Hello," he grunted. Then, seeing Navarre, he said, "Who's your friend?"

"His name is Melwod Finst. I thought you'd be interested in meeting him."

Carso extended a grimy hand. "Pleased."

Navarre stared unhappily at Carso. Filthy, drunken, ragged looking, there was little of the Earthman about him save the bald scalp. True enough, Carso was a half-breed, his mother an Earth-woman—but now he seemed to have brought to the fore the worst characteristics of his nameless, drunken Joran father. It was a sad sight.

He slipped in beside the halfbreed and gestured to the bowl of foul Kariadi beer. "I've never understood how you could drink that stuff, Domrik."

Carso wheeled heavily in his seat to look at Navarre. "I didn't know we were on first-name terms, friend. But—wait! Speak again!"

"You're a bleary-eyed sot of a halfbreed." Navarre said in his natural voice.

Carso frowned. "That voice—your face—you remind me of someone. But he was not of Kariad."

"Nor am I," said Navarre. "Blue skin's a trapping easily acquired. As is a Kariadi wig."

Carso started to chuckle, bending low over the beer. At length he said, "You devil, you fooled me!"

"And many another," Navarre replied. "There's a price on my head on Jorus."

"Eh?" Carso was abruptly sober; the merriment drained from his coarse-featured face. "What's that you say? Are you out of favour with the Overlord? I was counting on you to have that foolish sentence of banishment revoked and—"

"Kausirn knows our plans. I barely got off Jorus alive; even Joroiran is against me. He ordered Kausirn to send a fleet to destroy the settlement on Earth."

Carso bowed his head. "Does he know where Earth is? After all, it wasn't easy for us to find it."

" I don't know," Navarre said. He glanced at Helna. " We'll have to find the old librarian who gave us the lead. Keep him from helping anyone else."

" That's useless," Carso said. " If Kausirn knows about the Chalice and its contents, he also knows where the crypt was located and how to get there. At this moment the Joran fleets are probably blasting our settlements. Here. Have a drink. It was a fine empire while it lasted, wasn't it ?"

" No Joran spacefleet has left the Cluster in the last month," Helna said, suddenly, quietly.

Navarre looked up. " How do you know ?"

" Oligocrat Marhaill has reason to suspect the doings on Jorus," she said. " He keeps careful watch over the Joran military installations, and whenever a Joran battlefleet departs on manoeuvres we are apprised of it. This information is routed through me on its way to Marhaill. And I tell you that the Joran fleet has been utterly quiet this past month."

Reddening, Navarre asked, " How long has this sort of observation been going on ?"

" Four years, at least."

Navarre slammed the flat of his hand on the stained table-top. " Four years ! That means you penetrated my alleged defensive network with ease—and all the time I was trying to set up a spy-system on Kariad, and failing !" He eyed the girl with new respect. " How did you do it ?"

She smiled. " Secret, Navarre, secret ! Let's maintain the pretence : I'm Earthman to Marhaill's Court, you to Joroiran's. It wouldn't be ethical for me to speak of such matters to you."

" Well enough. But if the fleet's not left yet, that means one of two things—either they're about to leave, or else they don't know where to go !"

" I lean toward the latter," Carso said. " Earth's a misty place. I expect they're desperately combing the old legends now for some hint."

" If we were to obtain three Kariadi battle-cruisers," Helna mused aloud. " And ambush the Joran fleet as it came down on Earth—? "

" Could we ?" Navarre asked.

" You're in Kariadi garb. What if I obtained an appointment in our space navy for you, Navarre ? And then ordered you out with a secondary fleet on—ah—manouevres ? Say, to the vicinity of Earth ?"

" And then I tell my crewmen that war has been declared between Jorus and Kariad, and set them to destroying the unsuspecting Joran fleet !" Navarre went on.

" Not destroying," said Helna. " Capturing ! We make sure your battlewagons are equipped with tractor-beams—and that way we add the Joran ships to our growing navy."

Carso nodded in approval. " It's the only way to save Earth. If you can handle the appointments, Helna."

" Marhaill is a busy man. I can handle him. Why, he was so delighted to see me return after a year's time that he didn't even ask me where I had been !"

Navarre frowned. " One problem. Suppose Kausirn *doesn't* know where Earth is ? What if no Joran fleet shows up ? I can't keep your Kariadi on manoeuvres forever out there, waiting for the enemy."

" Suppose," said Helna, " we make sure Kausirn knows. Suppose we *tell* him."

Carso gasped. " I may have been drinking, but I can't be *that* drunk. Did you say you'd tell Kausirn where our settlements are ?"

" I did. It'll remove the constant pressure of his potential threat. And it'll add a Joran fleet to a Kariadi one to form a nucleus of the new Terran navy . . . if we handle the space-battle properly."

" And what if Kausirn sends the entire Joran armada out against your puny three ships ? What then ?"

" He won't," said Navarre. " It wouldn't be a logical thing to do. He'd expose Jorus to too many dangers."

" I don't like the idea," Carso insisted, peering moodily at the oily surface of his beer. " I don't like the idea at all."

## V

Four days later Navarre, registered at the Hotel of the Red Sun, received an engraved summons to the Oligocrat's court, borne by a haughty Kariadi messenger in red wig and costly livery.

Navarre accepted the envelope and absently handed the courier a tip ; insulted, the messenger drew back, sniffed at Navarre, and bowed stiffly. He left, looking deeply wounded.

Grinning, Navarre opened the summons. It said :

BY THESE PRESENTS BE IT KNOWN

*That* Marhaill, *Oligocrat of Kariad, does on behalf of himself and his fellow members of the Governing Council invite*

MELWOD FINST

*of Kariad City to Court on the 7th instant of the current month.*

*The said* Finst *is therein to be installed in the Admiralty of the Navy of Kariad, by grace of private petition received and honoured.*

The invitation was signed only with the Oligocrat's monogram, the scrollwork *M* within the diamond. But to the right of that, in light pencil, were the initials *H.W.*, scrawled in Helna's hand.

Navarre mounted the document on the mantel of his hotel room and mockingly bowed before it. " All hail, Admiral Finst ! Melwod Finst of the Kariadi navy !"

He examined his makeup to see that the blue remained consistent and unblotched ; the wigmaker had done a good job, though. He was still the impeccable model of a Kariadi gentleman.

Inspection over, he dialled Helna at the Oligocrat's Palace.

" Melwod Finst speaking. My invitation to Court came today, and I wish to tender my gratitude for securing this appointment for me."

" It was but your just desert," Helna said gravely. " The rank of Admiral is not dispensed lightly. I hope to be seeing you at Court tomorrow."

" Indeed you will. And may I have the pleasure of dinner with milady tonight ?"

Court was crowded the following day when Navarre, in a rented court-costume, appeared to claim his Admiralty. The long throne-room was lined on both sides with courtiers, members of the government, curious onlookers who had wangled admission, and those about to be honoured.

Marhaill, Oligocrat of Kariad, sat enthroned at the far end of the hall, sprawled awkwardly with his long legs jutting in separate directions. At his right sat Helna, befitting her rank as Earthman to the Court and chief adviser of Marhaill. On lesser thrones to both sides sat the eight members of the governing council, looking gloomy, dispirited, and bored. Their functions had atrophied ; Kariad, once an authentic

oligarchy, had retained the forms but not the manner of the ancient government. The governing council had value only as decoration.

But it was an imposing tableau.

Navarre stood impatiently at attention for fifteen minutes, sweating under his court-costume—and praying fervently that his dye would not run—until the swelling sound of an electronic trumpet called the assemblage to order.

Marhaill rose. He was a gigantic man, almost seven feet high at Navarre's rough estimate. How much of that was built up in his footwear, Navarre could not judge ; but he bore in mind that even Joroiran was an imposing figure when he chose to be.

The Oligocrat made a brief speech, welcoming all and sundry to Court, and finished by declaring that today was the day those who had performed meritorious service to the realm were to be rewarded. Helna surreptitiously slipped a scroll into his hands, and he began to read, in a deep, magnificently resonant voice which Navarre suspected was his own, and not simply magnified by a micro-amplifier embedded in his larynx.

Navarre counted. His name was the sixty-third to be called; preceding him came three other new admirals, four generals, seven ministers plenipotentiary, and assorted knights of the realm. Evidently Marhaill believed in maintaining a good number of flashily-titled noble gentry on Kariad. It was a way of assuring loyalty and service, thought Navarre.

Finally :

" Melwod Finst. For meritorious services to the realm of Kariad, for abiding and long-standing loyalty to our throne, for generous and warm-hearted qualities and for skill in the arts of space. We show our deep gratitude by bestowing upon him the rank of Admiral in our Space Navy, with command of three vessels of war."

Navarre had been carefully coached in the procedure by Helna. When Marhaill concluded the citation, Navarre clicked his heels briskly, stepped from the audience, and advanced to the throne.

He gave a military salute. " Thanks to Your Grace." He knelt.

Marhaill leaned forward and draped a red-and-yellow sash over Navarre's shoulders.

" Rise, Admiral Melwod Finst of our Navy."

Rising, Navarre's eyes met those of Marhaill's. The Oligocrat's eyes were deep, searching—but were they searching enough to realize the new Admiral was a shaven Earthman, renegade from Jorus? It didn't seem that way.

The shadow of a smile flickered across Navarre's face as he made the expected genuflection and backed from the Oligocrat's throne. It was a strange destiny for an Earthman: Admiral of Kariad. But Navarre had long since learned to take the strange in stride.

He knelt again before Helna, showing the gratitude due to his sponsor, and melted back into the crowd, standing now in the line of those who had been honoured. Marhaill called the next name. Navarre adjusted his admiral's sash proudly, and, standing erect, watched the remainder of the ceremony with deep interest.

A grand fete followed at which the hundred-thirty-eight recipients of honours were granted a luxurious banquet in the Palace. Marhaill himself put in only a token appearance at the beginning; his place was taken by Gobrovir, a wizened little member of the governing council.

The food was good, the wine superb. Navarre sat as far from the other new admirals as he possibly could, planting himself among the ambassadors-designate at the lower end of the table. During the vague period of after-dinner chatter before the breakup of the group, Navarre had his one close moment of the day.

That occurred when a balding but fierce-looking Kariadi in an admiral's red-and-yellow sash drifted toward Navarre, drink in hand.

"Melwod Finst, isn't it? I'm Admiral Jollin Garsignol, First Navy."

The new Admiral Finst muttered a greeting.

But Admiral Garsignol was persistent. "I can't quite seem to place you, Finst. You a First Navy man, by any chance?"

"Eh?" Navarre cupped his ear. "Speak up, please."

"I said, *are you First Navy*?"

Navarre considered that for a moment, before shaking his head. "No. Not."

He edged toward the bar, but Garsignol said, "Third, then? Seems to me I saw you in the Vallibin action, now that I think of it. Third?"

" My ears," Navarre explained loudly. " Suffered injury in last campaign. Haven't heard worth a damn since then. You just have to write things out if you want to ask me things, Admiral Gilsogno."

" *Garsignol.* I'll—oh, never mind."

Chuckling, Navarre helped himself to another drink.

He escaped further questions on the part of his fellow admirals, and managed to leave the hall at a seemly hour, stomach well-filled, warm of heart.

Helna met him outside. " Your ships have already been assigned," she told him. " Three of the biggest cruisers we have. I'm having them specially refurbished for the occasion with ultrapowerful tractor-beams and whatever artillery can be scraped up."

" Good. Won't Marhaill suspect anything, though ?"

" Him ? He's too busy with his current mistress to pay any attention to what goes on around him. I could requisition the whole planet over to you and he wouldn't find out about it for a week."

" When do I take over my command ?"

" I'll show you the ships tomorrow. Then we send word to Kausirn—we can do that through regular spy channels—and take off for Galaxy 18347 to wait for the Joran ships to arrive."

Navarre nodded. " It sounds good. I think we'll swing it, after all."

" Somehow," she said. " Somehow—Admiral."

He returned to his hotel-room and spent the evening reading. About midnight, he felt the urge to celebrate, and put a call through to the lodgings of Domrik Carso. But the halfbreed was nowhere to be found, and Navarre, not caring to drink alone, went to sleep.

The Military spaceport closest to Kariad City was the home base of the Fifth Navy, and it was to this group that Helna had had Navarre assigned.

He reported promptly the following morning, introducing himself rather bluntly to the commanding officer of the base and requesting his ships. He was eyed somewhat askance ; obviously he was not the first sheerly political appointee in the history of the Kariadi navy. In any event, a sullen-

looking enlisted man drove Navarre out to the spaceport itself, where three massive battle-cruisers stood gleaming in the bright morning rays of Secundus, the yellow sun.

Navarre nearly whistled in surprise ; he hadn't expected ships of this order of tonnage. He watched, delighted, as Kariadi spacemen swarmed over the three ships, getting them into shape for the forthcoming battle manoeuvres. They weren't expecting an actual battle, but from their enthusiasm and vigour Navarre knew they would be grateful for the opportunity just once to experience actual combat.

" Very nice," he commented, whenever any of the base officers asked his opinion of his command ships. " Excellent ships. Excellent."

He met his underofficers, none of whom seemed particularly impressed by their new commander. He shook hands coldly, rather flabbily. Since they all knew he was a political appointee he was determined to act the part fully.

At noon he ate in the officers' supply room. He was in the midst of discussing his wholly ficticious background of tactical skills when a frightened young orderly burst in.

" What's the meaning of this disturbance ?" Navarre demanded in a gruff voice.

" Are you Admiral Finst ? Urgent message for Admiral Finst, sir. Came in over top-priority wires from the Palace just now."

" Finst " took the sealed message, slit it open, read it. It said :

*Come back to the Palace at once. Treachery. Serious danger threatens. Helna.*

" You look pale, Admiral," remarked an officer nearby.

" I've been summoned back to the Palace," said Navarre. " Urgent conference. Looks very serious, I'm afraid. They need me in a hurry."

Suddenly all eyes were on the political appointee who had in a moment shown his true importance. " What is it, Finst ? Has war been declared ?"

" I'm not at liberty to say anything now. Would you have a jet brought down for me ? I must return to the Palace."

Helna was pale and as close to tears as Navarre had ever seen her. She paced nervously through her private apartment in the Palace, telling the story to Navarre.

" It came through my spy-web," she said. " We were monitoring all calls from Kariad to Jorus, and they taped—this !"

She held out a tape. Navarre stared at it. " Do you always tape every call that goes through ?"

" Hardly. But I suspected, and—here ! Listen to it !"

She slipped the tape into a playback and activated the machine. The voice of an operator was heard, arranging a subspace call from Kariad to Jorus, collect.

Then came the go-ahead. A voice Navarre recognized instantly as that of the Vegan Kausirn said, " Well ? This call is expensive. Speak up !"

" Kausirn ? This is Carso. I'm on Kariad. Got some news for you, Kausirn."

Navarre paled. *Carso* ? Why was the halfbreed calling Kausirn ? Suspicion gnawed numbly at him as he listened to the unfolding conversation.

" What do you have to tell me ?" came the Vegan's icy voice.

" Two things. The location of Earth, and something else. The first will cost you twenty thousand units, the second thirty thousand."

" You drive a hard bargain, Carso. We have our own lead on Earth. Fifty thousand credits is no small amount for such information."

" You've heard the price, Kausirn. I don't really care, you know. I can manage. But you'll feel awful foolish when Navarre pulls what he's going to pull."

" Explain yourself."

" Fifty thousand credits, Kausirn."

A moment's silence. Then : " Very well. I'll meet your terms. Give me the information."

Carso's heavy chuckle was heard. " Cash first, talk later. Wire the money to the usual place. When it reaches me, I'll call you back—collect."

Kausirn's angry scowl was easy to imagine. " You'll get your filthy money," he said.

*Click* !

" That's all we got. The conversation was held at 1100 this morning," said Helna. " It takes about two hours to wire money from Jorus to Kariad. That means Carso won't be calling back for a half hour yet."

" I can't believe it," Navarre said. He clenched his blue-stained fists. " Carso ? Selling out ?"

" He was only a halfbreed," Helna said. " He didn't have the pure blood. He didn't care, he said. It was just a chance to get money. All the time he journeyed with us to Earth, he was doing it as a lark, a playful voyage. The man has the morals of an earthworm !"

Broodingly Navarre said, " He was banished for killing a tavern-keeper. He would have killed the old Genobonian librarian who helped us, had we not stopped him. Everything in his character was sullen and drunken and murderous, and he fooled us ! We thought he was a sort of noble savage, didn't we ? And he's sold us out to the Vegan !"

" Not yet. We can still stop him."

" I know. But he's obviously the one who betrayed us to Kausirn while I was journeying back to Jorus ; heaven knows why he didn't give Kausirn the co-ordinates for Earth while he was at it. I guess he was holding out for a higher price ; that must be it ! Well, Kausirn's met his price." Navarre glanced at the time. " Order a jetcab for me. I'm going to see Carso."

Carso's lodgings were in the centre of Kariad City, in a dilapidated hotel that might have seen its best days during the time of the Starkings' League. There was something oppressively ancient about the street ; it bore the weight of thousands of years.

Navarre kept careful check on the time. Helna's astonishingly efficient spy system was now monitoring the influx of wired cash from Jorus to Kariad, and she would arrange that the fifty thousand units from Kausirn would be delayed at least until 1300. The time was 1250 now.

Navarre left the cab half a block from Carso's lodging-house, and covered the rest of the distance on foot. A tired-looking Brontallian porter slouched behind the desk in the lobby, huddled down reading a tattered fax-sheet. When Navarre entered, clad still in his admiral's uniform, the porter came to immediate attention.

Navarre laid a five-credit note on the desk. " Is there a Domrik Carso registered here ?"

The porter squinted uncertainly, pocketed the five, and nodded. " Yes, Admiral."

" His room ?"

Another five. " Seven-oh-six, Admiral."

Navarre smiled mildly. " Now give me the pass-key to his room."

The porter bristled. " Why, I can't do that, Admiral ! It's against the law ! It's— "

A third time Navarre's hand entered his pocket. The porter awaited a third five-credit note, but this time a deadly little blaster appeared. The Brontallian cowered back, clasping his webbed hands tightly.

" Give me the key," Navarre said.

Nodding vociferously, the porter handed Navarre a square planchet of copper stamped 706. Navarre smiled and gave the Brontallian the third five. Turning, he moved silently toward the elevator.

If anything, the residence floors of the building were seedier and less reputable-looking than the lobby. Navarre waited, poised outside 706, blaster cupped innocently in the hollow of his palm. He had, it seemed, arrived at just the proper moment. He could hear Carso's voice as he tried to put through a collect call to Kausirn.

Minutes passed ; the operator's voice was all but inaudible through the door. Once a drunk came out of 703, stared at Novarre, and reeled toward him.

" Eaveshdropper, eh ? You know what we do—"

Navarre took three steps forward and caught the man by the throat. He tightened his grip ; the drunk reddened. Navarre let go of him, hit him in the stomach, caught him as he toppled, and dragged him back into his room. Carso was still expostulating with the operator when Navarre returned to his post outside the door.

Finally a familiar thin voice said, " I take it you've received the money ?"

" It came," Carso rumbled. " I'm delivering my end of the deal. Navarre left settlements on Earth—now called Velidoon by its inhabitants, and on Procyon IV, which used to be called Fendobar and is now Mundahl. These worlds are in Galaxy RGC18347. The co-ordinates are—"

Navarre listened as Carso offered a full and detailed set of instructions for reaching Earth. He tensed ; timing now would be of the utmost importance. The bait had been cast.

He had to stop Carso before the halfbreed told Kausirn how to avoid the hook.

Navarre touched his key to the platestud of the door, and it swung back, revealing Carso squatting before the televisor.

" Now, as to the second bit of information, Kausirn. It's simply this : Navarre and—"

Navarre threw the door open noisily. Carso sprang up, caught totally by surprise. Navarre raised his blaster and put a bolt through the televisor, cutting off an impatient expostulation on the part of Kausirn. Hefting the blaster speculatively, he looked at Carso.

" You've greatly disillusioned me, Domrik. I clung to the outmoded belief that Earthmen had a certain higher loyalty, even halfbreeds. Even the drop of Terran blood in their veins would—"

" What are you talking about, Navarre ? What's the idea of busting in here and wrecking the 'visor ?"

Navarre tightened his grip on the gun. " Don't try to bluff. I listened to your conversation with Kausirn. I also heard your words of this morning. You sold us out, Domrik. For a stinking fifty thousand credits, you were willing to hand Earth and Procyon over to Kausirn's butchers."

Carso's eyes were angrily bloodshot. He had obviously been drinking heavily—to soothe his conscience, perhaps. He said, " I wondered how long it would take you to find out about me. Damn you and your pure blood lines, Navarre ! You and all your Earthmen !"

He came barrelling heavily forward.

Navarre swung the blaster to one side and met Carso's charge with his shoulder. Carso grunted and kept on ; he was a stocky man easily fifty pounds heavier than Navarre.

Navarre stepped back out of the way and jabbed the blaster into Carso's stomach. " Hold it, Domrik, or I'll open you up !"

Carso swung wildly at Navarre ; the Earthman jumped back and fired. For a moment Carso stood frozen in the middle of the room, knees sagging slightly. He glared at Navarre as if in reproach, and dropped.

" I still don't believe it," Navarre said quietly. He slipped the blaster out of sight and left, locking the door behind him. He stopped for a beer at the dingy bar on the corner ; forcing

an entire mug of the nauseous stuff down his throat helped to ease the shock.

Then he dialled Helna. Briefly, he told her Carso was dead. Hanging up, he decided he needed another beer. His mind still had trouble accepting the fact that the halfbreed had been a traitor.

## VI

In the control cabin of the Kariadi flagship *Pride of Kariad*, lurking just off the ringed world that was Sol VI, Admiral Melwod Finst, otherwise Earthman Hallam Navarre, sat behind a coruscating sweep of flashing screens.

" Any sign of the Joran ships yet ?" he asked.

From the rear observation channel came the reply : " Not yet. We're looking."

" Good." He switched over to master communications and ordered a hookup with his number two ship, the *Jewel of the Cluster*, lying in wait just off Procyon VII.

" *Jewel* to *Pride*. What goes ?"

" Admiral Finst speaking. Any sign of a Joran offensive yet ?"

" Not a one, sir. We're keeping the channel open to notify you of any attack."

" Right."

Navarre paced the length of the cabin and back. The constant inaction, now that they were actually here in the Sol system, was preying on his nerves. They were eight days out from Kariad ; the hop had been made in due order two days after Carso's death, and even the mighty generators of the three battle-cruisers had required six days to cross the billion light-year gulf through hyperspace.

He had stationed one ship off the Procyon system and his two remained in the Sol group, waiting for the Joran fleet to appear. The men knew they were to fight Jorus ; they were primed for battle, keen for it. The communications network was kept open constantly. Whenever the ships of Jorus made their appearance, Navarre and his fleet would be ready.

Helna had remained on Kariad, controlling operations from that end. Her spies had reported that Kausirn was sending a fleet to Earth ; Navarre awaited it.

On the fifth day, his radar operator reported activity. " They're emerging from hyperspace at the very edge of the Sol system, sir. Four billion miles out, intersecting the orbit of Sol IX."

" Order battle stations," Navarre snapped to his aides. Flipping the master channel, he sent a command rifling along subspace to the *Jewel of the Cluster* : " Get here at once—or faster !"

The *Jewel* hopped. A passage of a mere eleven light-years was virtually instantaneous ; within minutes a compact wedge of three Kariadi ships waited off ringed Sol VI for the oncoming Jorans.

" We're looking to capture, not to destroy. Our defensive screens are to be up at all times and no shots are to be fired unless I give the order to do so."

Two of Navarre's aides exchanged glances as he delivered this order, but said nothing. Qualified or not, he was the Admiral, to be obeyed implicity.

The fleet shifted into defensive position. Navarre ran a final check on the tractor-beams. All reported in working order at maximum intensity.

" Okay," he said. " They're heading inward on standard ion-drive. Formation A, at once."

Formation A was a basket arrangement, the three ships swinging high into a triangular interlock and moving downward on the unsuspecting Joran ships. At that angle, the tractor-beams would be at their greatest efficiency.

Navarre himself remained at the master communications screens. He leaned forward intently, watching the dull black shapes of the three—only three !—Joran ships moving forward through space.

" *Now* !" he cried.

The bleak night of space was suddenly lit with the flaring tumult of tractor-beams : golden shafts of light lanced across the black of space, crashing down on the Joran ships, locking them tight.

The Jorans retaliated : their heavy-cycle guns swung into action, splashing megawatts of energy forth. But Navarre had ordered full defensive screens ; the Joran guns were futile.

Navarre ordered contact made with the Joran flagship. Admiral Drulk, eyes blazing with rage, appeared on the screen.

" What does this mean ? You Kariadi have no jurisdiction in this sector—are you looking to touch off a war between Jorus and Kariad ? Or *is* there such a war already in progress, that we don't know about ?"

" Jorus and Kariad are at peace, Admiral."

" Well then ? I demand you release us from traction at once !"

" Impossible. We need your ships for purposes of our own. We'll require immediate surrender."

Drulk stared at him. " Who *are* you ?"

" Admiral Finst, of Kariad." Grinning he added, " You knew me at Joroiran's court as Hallam Navarre."

" The Earthman ! But—"

" No buts, Admiral. Will you surrender—or do we have to tow you into the sun ?"

Six ships stood nose-upward in the bright golden sun that warmed Terra. A hastily-constructed stockade contained six hundred bewildered prisoners, the original crews of the Kariadi and Joran fleets.

It was a pleasant sight, Navarre thought, as he stood on the hillside in the hip-deep green grass. And he would never forget the look on the faces of his own men when Admiral Melwod Finst unwigged and wiped away the blue dye that turned a Kariadi Admiral into a sardonically-smiling Earthman.

The original six thousand sleepers now numbered more than eight thousand ; many of the women were soon to bear their second children.

It would take time. But the dominion of Earth would be reborn through the galaxy—with six mighty battle-cruisers to serve as the first of its navy.

A subspace message was on its way across the galaxy to Kariad, to Helna, telling her of the victory. It would take five more days to reach her ; so great was the size of the galazy.

It would take time. But soon the sons of Earth again would rule the stars. The blue sweep of the sky overhead seemed to be promising it, as Navarre stared upward.

**—Calvin M. Knox**

Watch out for the final story in this trilogy, " Vengeance Of The Space Armadas," coming shortly.

*Were they dreams—the memories of places he'd never been in and people he'd never known? Or was "reality" a dream?*

# MAN OVERBOARD

## by ALIX KERS

Terrified, he ran through the evil, fog-thick, echoing night. He raced breathless down twisting, tortuous streets, through stinking alleys where shapeless masses sprawled, acrawl with scuttling, watchful bugs. He slipped, feet juddering on the rain-slick cobblestones. His frantic eyes strained through the black and diffused grey of the night, avoiding with a shudder the yellow cones of light spilling from the street lamps to reflect from the wet, slimy pavement.

Those he fled from were hot behind him but still holding back; he could sense their confidence in their other thousands who waited for him at every place in which he might seek sanctuary. There was nothing to do but run; run and hope that somewhere, somehow, there might be an opening in the remorseless net closing surely around him.

He burst from a side street, heavy shoes clattering an insane rhythm as he slewed and skidded to a stop, jerking his head from side to side, frantically seeking another route. The avenue in front of him was much too bright; he dared not run the additional risk of being too clearly visible. With a whimper, he dashed headlong into the nearest alley.

Feline shapes with feral eyes crouched and arched and loped silently along the top of the alley's fence, to snarl, spit and reach out for his eyes with septic claws. He stumbled heedlessly over something soft and wetly yielding, and the hand he extended to break his fall brushed something bristly and electrical that swiped at him, faster than thought.

Bleeding, he staggered from the alley's end into the street. It stretched before him, dark and dim, and he was running down it in full flight before he noticed that the walls on either side were absolutely featureless, unmarked by doorways or windows. The clattering crescendo of his footsteps trailed off. dribbled into silence. With his heart a dreadful, aching drum in his chest, he stood motionless.

The blank walls went up, up, and disappeared into the fog. Ahead, they continued along the street for half a block, then they and the street were cut off by a vertical blackness that was not a wall. Suddenly, there were eyes at his back, like hairy hands scrabbling for a grip, and he whirled to face them. Shadows loomed out of the pressing fog, curiously low and strangely squat, just too far away to be clearly seen. He whined inaudibly and backed away from them towards the black nothingness where the street ended.

Then, just like that, he knew what was happening and what would happen. *I've seen all this before*, he thought. *It's a copy of an ancient film taken in the days when there was a London and an Earth, and I saw it back in civilization somewhere, in a reconstruction of a pre-atomic theatre.* Only the shadows and the blank walls and the empty blackness were different, but he knew about them, too.

*I'm dreaming*, he said to himself, feeling a maniac impulse to giggle because everything was so simple. He was supposed to back away from the advancing shadows, back and back until he came to the black nothingness, where he would suddenly stumble and fall, screaming and retching, backwards into Eternity or Outer Space or Death—but certainly into his bed on Henderson's Planet, where he would wipe the cold sweat from his face, smoke a cigarette, and wonder about the dream.

The squat, inhuman shadows were closing in. Abruptly, he turned his back on them and ran, confident now, towards the black End. *Might as well get it over with*, he thought. In the split instant before he reached the blackness, he said aloud, in a ludicrous parody of old-time Cockney, " Cor, but they won't scrag me now, not 'arf. Ta-ta, dear boomping beasties; you'll never catch old Dom Hagar, now !"

That was when he screamed, a thin threadlike thing of terror and revulsion and utter rejection that sat him up in his bed, wide awake, to bury his face in his hands. After a long,

shuddering silence, he forced his voice out through a throat still raw and dry from the scream.

" My name is Anton Cord," he said, trying for calmness but achieving nothing but flat hysteria. " My name is Anton Cord, please, it is, my name is Anton Cord."

It took him a long time to fall asleep again. And when he did, the dream was waiting.

" I'll have another drink, Harry. The same." Cord slouched forward against the bar, midway down the fully occupied line of stools. He lit a cigarette and with difficulty placed it on the rim of the ashtray in front of him ; it seemed perversely determined to slip either to the smooth wood of the counter, or else among the crumpled butts in the tray. Cord was very drunk.

The Cold Spoor Club was studiously old-fashioned, but not to the point of ostentation. Modelled on the lines of bars of the early twentieth century, it retained character yet was still smooth and functional. Chromed furniture complemented the many mounted trophies ; great heads shaggy or slick with simulated mucus, reptilianly scaled or dusted with fine powder against a predator's grasping tentacles. The atmosphere was exciting and at the same time comfortable ; the club took its personality from the patrons, who for the most part were colonists and adventurers—people who did not insist on strict respectability, and yet who were intelligent enough not to need an atmosphere of artificial depravity or hectic vice, both common on the more " civilised " planets.

Behind the long wood-and-chrome bar there was a darkly tinted mirror, punctuated by intermittent shelves of liquor bottles. Along the opposite wall stood a line of booths, broken in the middle by a door leading to the other rooms, a dining room with scattered tables, a dance floor, and a small stage. Later in the evening a half-breed, not-quite-human girl would sing, bathed in a spotlight that pulsed in time to her slow deep voice, dark ballads the listeners always recognized, somewhere inside them, even though they'd never heard them before.

Harry, the bartender, filled Cord's glass and watched disapprovingly as it was drained. He looked up and down the bar, and seeing no customers calling him, leaned closer to Cord.

" Cord, can I ask you a question ?"

" Go ahead," Cord said disinterestedly. The liquor no longer had much effect other than to burn pleasantly going down ; he fancied that it vaporized within him and seeped through his skin. He could smell the warm, heady fumes plainly.

" Look, Cord ; why don't you see a psycher ?" The bartender was prompted by genuine concern but the fact didn't penetrate to Cord. Instant revulsion swept through him, a blind nausea like that of an acrophobe who suddenly finds himself looking down from a great height. Cord glared at Harry with a mixture of anger and self-pity at being betrayed by someone in whom he had placed trust.

" Harry," he said slowly, thickly, " Harry, I thought you were my friend."

" Cord, I *am* your friend." The bartender had known far too many drunks ; he did not follow the impulse to raise his eyes exasperatedly heavenwards. " Look, I've been your friend ever since you landed on this planet a year ago. Steered you to that job at the gunsmith's. I introduced you around, got you in with the guys. We've gone hunting together quite a few times, and had fun. Right ?" He looked at Cord until the other grudgingly assented.

" So all right ; we're friends. And now you suddenly start drinking like a fish, and when I ask you what's wrong, you give with a mixed-up mess about how you have had dreams, and how you saw a girl who reminded you of a girl you never knew, and how you keep remembering a lot of things about people you say you've never even met." Harry was a tall, muscular man with a thick head of mousy hair, and now he ran a hand back through it in a gesture of puzzlement.

" If you weren't my friend, I wouldn't give a damn. But the way it is, you got something wrong with you, and all I can do is tell you to see a psycher. I have to tell you that, if only because I'm your friend."

Cord shook his head in drunken stubbornness. " You are wrong, Harry. If you were my friend, you wouldn't tell me to see a psycher."

" For God's sake, Cord, what's so bad about going to a psycher ? Everybody does it at one time or another. I just don't get it !"

" I can't stand them, that's all. I just can't stand them." Drunk, Cord could find no better verbalization of his revulsion,

of the horrified disgust the word " psycher " evoked in him. His thoughts churned with loathing at the idea of being probed, questioned, analyzed, even *hypnotized*. The last was the most horrible ; to lie there helpless and responsive and ductile, completely obedient to the slightest whim of a " doctor " who might at any moment choose to play God—to order Cord to do this or think that or feel something else . . . Cord mentally twisted and writhed at the thought of being hypnotized, writhed and shuddered and shouted a cerebral " No !" the way some people do at the thought of death.

" I just can't stand them," he repeated for the third time.

" What kind of talk is that ? Look . . ." Someone down the bar was tapping a glass against the wood, calling for the bartender. Harry nodded his willingness to serve, raised a hand that meant, " just a minute," and turned back to Cord.

" Cord, listen ; things are going to be jumping tonight, and we probably won't get another chance to talk. So get this now ; if you're going to get drunk, get drunk here. Stick around until closing and I'll take you home and see that you're okay. Hell, I want to talk to you ; you've got some pretty wrong ideas. If you pass out before closing or feel like you're going to, use the cot in the office.

" You understand me ? Get drunk if you must, but stay here."

" All right, Harry." A glow of warmth spread through Cord's being ; he had a friend, someone who would take care of him, see that he came to no harm. " All right, Harry," he said again, and offered the man his hand.

" You nut, Cord," Harry said with rueful affection. He squeezed Cord's hand and hurried off down the bar. Cord watched him go with mixed feelings ; part of him wanted to get away, to run, to leave the place because Harry was suspect, had suggested Cord embrace horror and see a psycher. Overriding this was the knowledge that Harry was a nice guy, who had only said what just about anyone would have, under the circumstances.

But what would he do—Cord wondered—if he knew what was happening ?

" *I'm not crazy*, Cord thought, *but I will be, pretty soon.*

First the dreams, and then the girl. He'd been walking to work one morning, and at an intersection of two thronged,

busy streets, the girl had walked past. Cord had noticed her —as had every man within half a block—first because of her walk, a woman's answer to a strong man's swagger. Then the eye travelled up the precise, incredibly graceful curves of her legs, up to the nipped-in slimness of her waist, and finally —expecting all the time to be disappointed because so much beauty just couldn't possibly continue without some fault—up past her breasts to the chiselled, confident calm of a perfect face topped by jet-black hair.

Beautiful, self-assured women were no rarity on the frontier planets, of course. Anyone with a personality of any strength at all made every effort to get away from the sickly stasis of the " civilized " worlds. And beauty and talent were two eminently saleable articles ; the possession of either was flat assurance of a space-ticket to any place you cared to go. And this girl was not only beautiful, but intelligent ; the triple-cross insignia on her brooch marked her as a multilingual comptroller—a job calling for an I.Q. in excess of 150.

*Hell*, Cord had thought delightedly, as he turned his head to follow the girl's progress—becoming as he did so a unit in a sea of men's heads swaying toward the girl—*hell, wait until I tell Tabatha I've found her deadringer* !

It had been only later, in the store, that he'd realised sickeningly he'd never in all his life known anyone even remotely resembling the girl, and had furthermore never known a girl named " Tabatha."

But ever since that day, the dream had changed slightly, in that one of the advancing shadows always became visible. A great white cat as sleek and smoothly deadly as any panther, wearing a red silk bow on which was embroidered—and by some trick of the dream easily read—" Tabby."

Cord shook his head groggily to dispel the memory. His full glass caught his attention, and he drained it with a smooth, practiced motion, the one physical task his drunkenness never affected. Trying to sense whether the drink had any effect, he became suddenly aware that the other drinks had caught up with him. His lips and extremities felt tingling and numb, and there was a persistent buzzing in his ears. In a little while, he knew, the buzzing would become louder, would acquire form and rhythm. A hollow nasal roaring, *wangada, wangada, wangada, wangada*, that would grow louder and ever louder until he passed out.

He shook his head again, his brain feeling like a lump of ice in a glass of water ; rotate the glass and the ice floating within it remains stationary. *First the dream*, he thought, *and then the girl, and then . . .*

*And then the memories that aren't mine.*

The first—in the order in which they'd come to him—was by far the nicest. In it he lay on a soft, low bed, in a room illuminated by a faint reddish light that spilled from a wide window. Because of the light's colour, he thought it might be evening or early morning, but he was not sure which. In the memory, he lay quietly watching Tabatha as she stood nude at the window, one slim languid hand holding a grey curtain out of the way. With the soft glowing light on her, she was so beautiful, so perfect, that tears welled up in his eyes. He couldn't say anything, couldn't trust himself to speak. After a long while, and without taking her eyes from whatever she was watching outside, she said quietly, like slow faint bells, " There are never any clouds here." He answered with something indistinguishable, something that made her chuckle lightly and walk catlike and beautiful to the bed.

*I have never been on a cloudless planet*, Cord thought.

The second memory was as brief as the first. He stood on a slightly raised platform in front of a level expanse of lawn, an automatic scattergun—toylike and ineffectual—at the ready in his hands. " Pull !" he said, and instantly, several white things were hurled into the air—was it fifty yards away ? Then the gun kicked against his shoulder, his trigger-finger working so incredibly fast that the recoils became nothing but a burst of vibration, and, impossibly, there was nothing left in the air where the targets had been but a drifting cloud of fine white dust. Then Saul clapped him on the shoulder and said, " Wonderful shooting, boy !" That was the end of the episode except that in it he knew, somehow, that Saul was his best friend—when he'd never had a friend called Saul—and when he tried to remember Saul's face, to concentrate on the details, there was nothing but an indistinct blur.

Cord looked down at his empty glass ; it seemed to tremble in time to the roaring in his ears. Somehow, the enigma of *who* Tabatha and Saul were was not as important as *why*. Why did he have memories that were patently false, remembrance of incidents that couldn't have occurred ? And why did the first two memories—detailed and complete as they

were—appear so innocuous and unfrightening, compared to the third and most tenuous one?

The third—and last—memory was without location; there was nothing but unformed chaos and the feeling of being enclosed in a too-small room. Quite abruptly, as if his words had been chopped off from a preceding conversation—and a terrible revelatory one, at that—Saul spoke.

"Can't compete with you, Dom. There's . . ."

Every time since the memory had first appeared, Cord did the identical thing after that sentence. Simultaneous with the sound of the name "Dom," Cord's mind flinched violently while his lips curled in the expression that precedes a spasm of vomiting. Shame, disgust and fear drowned out the hated name, pushing it under, concealing it while Cord trembled and fought an urge to scream.

Cord stood up suddenly, beckoning to the bartender. Harry's face seemed to swim over to him, suspended in colourless mist, while the nasal insane roaring in his ears gained more and more volume, threatened to become his entire world. As if underwater, Cord heavily indicated his empty glass, unable to speak. Harry almost objected, took one look at Cord's face, and filled the glass without a word. Cord reached out and lifted the glass, seeing nothing but it, so that it rose to his lips as if teleported, the solitary bright living spot in an enormous black cavern that echoed and re-echoed with the roaring that precedes death and anesthesia. Cord opened his mouth to drink, not hearing or feeling the click of his lower teeth meeting the rim of the glass. Opened his mouth to drink, and . . .

A few feet away, Dom Hagar looked at Cord, holding a glass that seemed to invite Cord to join him in a toast.

Cord screamed and hurled his glass and, still screaming and with his teeth bared crazily in a snarl, was halfway across the bar before his glass had shattered in the mirror, shattered and obliterated with a cobwebbed star his reflection as it advanced to meet him.

And then Harry expertly and compassionately chopped at the back of Cord's neck with the edge of his hand, and—for Cord—the universe became an immense emptiness where not even the roaring lingered.

After an effortless time, which might have lasted for seconds or millennia, there was feeling and with it awareness—of a

sort. Once, as a child he had seen a picture of a device used by pre-atomic scientists to handle " hot " materials, in those incredible days when the mass-to-energy reaction had been allowed to create and radiate non-beneficial byproducts.

The picture had been of a pair of massive gloves, gloves that contained relays that activated—at the end of long, gleaming steel robotic arms—a pair of clumsy and inefficient but remarkably mobile graspers. Between the operator and his work was a concrete-and-lead wall, and he viewed what he was doing through an ingenious system of mirrors.

Now—how he knew it he could not understand ; it was enough to know it—he was the graspers and somewhere someone was operating him, peering into his brain and through his eyes, making experimental moves that had no significance until someone said (*said*?), " Now, try it."

The sensation was that of a gentle and reassuring push.

Abruptly, he had identity—though a strange and contradictory one—but before he could say " I am I " there was a door in front of him, and before he could ask " Where am I ?" he said clearly and aloud, " Man overboard !" because the door-lock was set to open only to that combination of sounds.

" Good midnight, Dom," said Saul, as the door opened.

Instantly he wanted to vanish, to disintegrate, or if that were impossible, then to scrape the name and voice from his mind like a slime and fling them away. But that was impossible too, and he couldn't die because of the soothing hands holding him down on a bed while calm voices assured him that everything was all right. There wasn't anything to do but go on with it, and once he accepted that along with the realisation that nothing had hurt him, he felt better ; though it was a bit of a shock to find he had already walked across the small, book-filled room to where Saul had risen from his chair, and was shaking hands.

" Good midnight, Saul," he said.

That was when he learned that not only could nothing hurt him, but it also didn't matter what he felt or thought. He felt like asking what was going on, but, exactly as in an all-sense movie, the action continued without his volition. By the time he realised it, he'd taken off his tunic and was sitting in a chair, facing Saul, who was obviously waiting for him to get comfortable before starting conversation.

There was a pause, like a throat-clearing, and then Saul said, " I called you over, Dom, because there's something I have to tell you."

This time he didn't even flinch at the name, and as Dom he had nothing to say, and so nodded to show his attention. As Dom, he knew before Saul said anything that it would be a bomb ; they'd known each other too long, too well, for surprises.

" Dom," Saul said heavily, but rushing through the words, " I'm in love with Tabatha."

As a shock, it was considerable. He was genuinely perplexed, and made more so by the fact that, as Dom, the emotion he felt, after the initial adrenalic surge, was . . . pity.

" So am I," he said.

" I know. My God, I know. Cigarette ?" Content now to sit back and watch the play, he remarked the trembling of Saul's hand offering the box, noticed that his own was surprisingly steady as it accepted a cigarette. He lit it and waited for Saul to do the same before speaking.

" And Tabatha loves me," he said. And then, groping for words, " Saul, look. Tabatha and I are . . . cohabiting."

There was a pause. " I see," Saul said. " That makes it harder."

" I don't understand."

As a spectator, he noticed something that the original Dom had not. That he'd taken three drags on the cigarette, and that Saul had been counting them. At that instant, Saul's voice changed, changed and acquired menace.

" Dom, I love Tabatha ; I want her. I *will* have her." There was a very short, calculated hesitation, then. " One thing I know ; I can't compete with you, Dom. There's nothing for it, then, but this. You've got to go."

" You're crazy !" Dom said it, and he thought it ; and someplace far away—wherever his controller was—someone said, " A parenoid !" The accents held utter stupefaction, and the voice followed with, " How the hell did we ever miss him ?"

" No, Dom," said Saul. " Only very clever. And I mean what I say."

" If I thought you were joking, I'd . . . don't you realise that you can't . . ." But he never finished the sentence ; Saul's menacing, level voice cut in.

" No, Dom . . . *you* can't. You can't get up from that chair, for one thing. For another, you can't hear anything but my voice . . ."

And it was true ; he might as well have been glued to the chair, might as well have been wearing closed-system radio earphones with Saul on the other end. Before the smooth voice told him he couldn't speak, he had time to say numbly, " It was the cigarette !" and hear Saul answer, " It was the cigarette." Then everything was whirling and submerged and he was shooting upwards toward consciousness faster and faster and then there was a splintering inward crash like an enormous kaleidoscope and suddenly he was sitting upright in a hospital bed, surrounded by three psychers, the youngest of whom repeated,

" It was the cigarette !"

And Dom Hagar, who had thought himself—who had actually been—Anton Cord, nodded his head slowly and tiredly and then said, addressing them all,

" It's all right now. I remember everything. Everything."

Once you knew what Saul was, it became perfectly easy to understand why he had not bothered to move, had not changed planets, had not even changed his personal living-quarters. Dom, who had been Cord, stood before the door once again, and behind him the two calm men, one from Psych-Bur and the other from Social Protection, waited silently and emotionlessly for whatever would come.

" Man overboard," said Dom, and the door opened.

An ordinary person—" normal " is not the word ; it reeks too much of statistical generality—whether he knows it or not, bases his life on the premise, " I am I, and more important to myself than to other men." A paranoid of Saul's type, driven into any cul-de-sac, placed under any strain unresolvable by superficial " normal " actions, reacts as if his life's keystone is, " I am I, and most important ; there are no other men." From this, it is an effortless, warped small step to, " I am infallible."

Saul had been a brilliant psycher, excellent at his trade. His natural intelligence and his rich family had conspired to give him a world in which he was never blocked, never frustrated. As long as that world held up, he was " normal," was a " nice guy," was—among other things—Dom's best friend. So, Saul loved Tabatha and Tabatha loved Dom. Ergo : Dom was an

obstacle, and as such, something to get rid of and to forget. Having been disposed of, Dom became to Saul so unimportant as to be non-existent.

The door opened, interrupting a scene that could not have been a pleasant one. Tabatha stood at the end of the room, facing the door over Saul's shoulder. Alone with him her face had been expressing bewildered humiliation ; now as Dom stepped through the doorway, it changed, became a beacon of incredulous wonder.

Saul, his back to the door, was resting one hip on the arm of a chair, a relaxed, dominating pose. Without looking behind him, he said, in the tone one uses to someone interrupting a family quarrel, " Get out of here."

" Saul—" said Dom. Saul's body went rigid, and his head snapped around.

His face was not pretty. In it, sanity was as tight and vulnerable as an inflated rubber balloon approached by a needle. The needle was Dom, Dom who should have been gone, who *was* gone ; who should not have came back, who *could not* come back. For a flicker of an instant Saul's face was totally blank with the realisation that not even he could make something non-existent by wishing it so. But that was as sane as he was ; if he could not wish Dom out of existence, he could at least try to do something, invalidate him, cancel him out. Accordingly, Saul's expression changed again—all so quickly that this last face might have been the one he turned around with—changed again and became scornful, contemptuous. The strong, righteous man facing the weak, indecisive coward.

" So, you've come back—dared to come back, after the way you left. Do you realise what we've gone through ?" But it was no use, was less than no use. Something in the atmosphere refused to lend support to the lie, so that the lightning-fast, psychologically perfect accusation snapped out of the air without an echo, leaving them all with the impression that he'd babbled incoherently.

" It's no use, Saul," said Dom, and his words held pity.

But Saul didn't appear to hear Dom ; instead looked past or through him, spoke to the man beyond as if Dom didn't exist.

" You there—I can see your brooch ; you're from Psych-But, right ? Then you've noticed this man is a schizoid ; take

him away and put him under therapy at once." Then, when the man made no move, " What's the matter with you ? Get him down to the hospital and I'll phone in an okay. There won't be any trouble ; I've got First Class general expert status."

" I am an executive trouble-shooter," said the man from Psych-Bur, in the disinterested voice of a scientist describing an uninteresting compound having an unspectacular reaction.

Dom said, " I told you, Saul. It's no use—"

Howling, Saul sprang at Dom's throat.

The small, grey man from Social Protection stepped quickly between them. He seemed to accept Saul into an embrace, seemed to be carried back by Saul's wieght with one foot reaching behind him in an action as inhuman and mechanical as the balancing of a tight-rope walker, seemed to stagger a little and bend a little more, and then they were on the floor with Saul underneath, pinned and powerless, unable to move but able to shriek curses and obscenities until the man from Psych-Bur bent over him and pressed something like a pocket flashlight to Saul's upper arm.

There was the sharp *thump* of a subcutaneous injection administered by a needle-less compressed-air hypo, and Saul was silent.

And then—after the man from Psych-Bur had spoken into a pocket-radio, calling an ambulance crew who quickly arrived and removed Saul's unconscious body ; after the grey little man from Social Protection had mumbled a few words into a mini-recorder and left—the man from Psych-Bur had looked at them, at Dom and Tabatha, with eyes that had seemed to give them everything from a pulse-count to an electroencephalogram to a Rorschach test, and said, " You'll be all right, I believe." He left, and they were alone.

For a long moment they stood tentatively motionless, letting their mutual presence re-engage the separated gears of their two personalities. Without appearing to have crossed the room, Tabatha was suddenly in Dom's arms, the contact so urgent as to be almost violent ; her arms about him pulling her face hard against his chest.

" He said . . . he said you thought I was trying to trap you into marrying me. That you only pretended to love me so I'd cohabit with you. He said you went away . . ." Tabatha wept like a child ; noisily, her shoulders heaving.

" It wasn't true," said Dom. " He drugged and hypnotized me, pushed my personality under and slammed the lid on it ; built me a new personality . . . a man named Anton Cord. He told me to go away, to forget."

" You came back."

" I came back. He tried too hard, you see. He knew his work couldn't possibly stand up to a psyching, so he made me fear and hate psychers, avoid them at all costs. He must have known I'd begin to remember things, sooner or later. He made my true name a thing of horror and disgust to me, too, so that if I began to remember it, I wouldn't want to."

Tabatha was quite still in his arms, holding him tightly, listening.

" It was too much ; the false personality broke down . . . painfully. Too many commands, too many fears. Anton Cord threw a screaming fit in a bar on Henderson's Planet . . . where he'd gone in obedience to Saul's commands, out near the galaxy's unexplored End.

" The bartender was an intelligent man. He knocked Cord —me—out, and called the psychers. And that was that."

She clung to him, not speaking, looking blankly at and through a wall, for a long time.

" What will we do now ?" she said.

He understood. It was her way of saying, *I have been with Saul because I thought you left me ; if you had not left me, I would not have done it. Now you are back and I want you still, as I have always wanted you.* And leaving him free ; leaving it all to him to decide.

He thought of saying, *I never left you ; the time I spent away from you was not my time ; Anton Cord was not me.* But that would not do ; it was not basic enough. He thought of saying, *I love you.* But he knew she would know that without its being said.

She was motionless against him, and he knew she was waiting.

And suddenly he remembered the last words of the man from Psych-Bur, the voice level, emotionlessly calm, eternally and unshakably sure of itself.

" Don't worry," Dom said, his lips against her hair. "Don't worry ; everything's going to be all right."

**—Alex Kirs**

*" Red Dog alert " meant there were enemy agents on the moon. And for Colonel Hughes, it meant a real chance to earn his stars !*

# MOON DUST

## by RICHARD R. SMITH

---

For the hundredth time, Colonel Hughes opened the box and looked at the two stars. He studied them very thoughtfully a few moments, then closed the small box for the hundredth time and placed it in a drawer.

They had said his promotion would be unofficial but assured him that when he reached the moon, he had permission to wear the stars. But it was a small honour ; he had been chosen for the top secret operation because although he was a capable officer, his non-aggressive, ambitionless character was a type that espionage agents paid little attention to. They had very frankly told him that and although it was the truth, it had hurt . . .

His thoughts were interrupted by the frantic buzzing of the telephone. Lifting the receiver, he said mechanically, "Headquarters Detachment, Colonel Hughes speaking."

He listened intently to the frantic voice and then broke the connection without warning by slamming the receiver in its cradle. A split second later he picked it up again and ordered, " Red dog alert !"

Moving faster than he had in years, he dropped the phone and ran from the room. Once outside the door to his office, he sprinted down the narrow hall and opened one door after

another while alarm bells began ringing with a deafening crescendo. The room behind the fourth door was occupied.

A dark-haired man stood with his back to a large control panel, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He turned toward the door when he heard it open.

To most observers, the man's reactions would have appeared normal, but Hughes had spent a lifetime watching men's faces while completely disregarding other physical actions. He had seen this automatic reaction many times before : the wrinkled forehead, the abruptly blanched face, the twitch of colourless lips, and eyes that suddenly widened.

He drew his automatic, aimed and fired in one swift motion. While the explosion echoed through the room, the man staggered backward, bounced off the maze of dials and crumpled to the floor.

Hughes replaced the gun in its holster as Sheldon ran into the room. The blonde-haired civilian exclaimed, " My God !" and knelt to examine the dead man. He felt absently for a pulse and stared at Hughes as he moved toward the control board.

" Why'd you do it ?"

Hughes' grey eyes surveyed the dials before him while he replied coldly, " He had a guilty look."

" A guilty look !" The public relations official backed toward the door and collided with a group of men who were entering the room.

" What happened ?" someone asked.

" He killed him ! Killed him because he had a guilty look ! He's crazy. *Crazy* ! "

Hughes finished his examination of the control board, deftly flipped various levers and turned to face the expectant group. He nodded at the corpse and explained, " He opened the outer tank valves and let most of our oxygen escape."

" How much ?"

Instead of replying, he nodded at a nearby sergeant. " Find out, Hendricks. When you've finished that, have everyone make an inspection of every piece of equipment, supply room and launching station. Give me the results as soon as possible"

" Yes, sir."

" For the benefit of those who don't know," Hughes explained, " the code ' Red dog alert ' means that our unit has been infiltrated by enemy agents. Everyone is to travel in

groups of three or more and ten minutes after alert is declared —" He glanced at his watch, "—two minutes from now, anyone found *not* in a group is to be shot immediately and without question. That means *anyone*, whether he's your best buddy or your brother-in-law."

A few minutes later there was a meeting of the base's executive personnel. Twelve men were crowded in the small office and smoke from twelve cigarettes formed a fog-like haze that drifted lazily toward the air-conditioning unit.

When everyone saw their commanding officer intently studying some papers on his desk, they maintained a polite silence. But their superior did not see the papers before him. Instead he saw the barracks back on Earth where their group had lived together during a compatibility test. He remembered distinctly one night when someone had smuggled some whisky into the barracks and he had stayed up half the night drinking and talking with a likable dark-haired fellow.

He mentally cursed the luck that had made him commanding officer of the First Lunar Base. It was a general's job but they had chosen a colonel because a general's absence would be noticed and questioned too much. Some officers would have given their right arm to be in his shoes but his ambitions didn't go that far : he had joined the army solely for the pension and other benefits and didn't fool himself with false noble thoughts.

Why had they selected him ? He knew he wasn't an incapable officer but he had spent the last decade of his career in a training camp ordering men to pick up cigarette butts around the company area ! Perhaps that was why they had picked him—it was harder to make men pick up trash under their feet than it was to make them fight for their lives. Perhaps the wheels had figured that if an officer was proficient in making men pick up cigarette butts, he could make them do *anything*.

Putting the papers aside, he began, " From all appearances, Crisconi wasn't insane. Since he destroyed most of our air supply there is only one conclusion . . . he was a traitor."

Sheldon cleared his throat noisily. " Colonel there's a point that's not clear in my mind. How did you know Crisconi was emptying our oxygen tanks ?"

"A guard outside the base saw the gas escaping and phoned." He continued rapidly, " If there was one enemy among us,

there can be others. We have to assume there are more and decide upon a method of detection. With the Red Dog Alert, everyone has to travel in groups." He couldn't resist grinning. " Intelligence on Earth has calculated that, considering the degree of screening we've undergone, it will be difficult for two spies to get into a group of three and *impossible* for three to form one group. If that's correct, any foreign agent on Fort Lunar will have someone watching him constantly. The point is—"

The phone rang and he grabbed it. The excited voice on the other end was audible throughout the room, " Sir, every rocket has been sabotaged !"

" How ? "

" A small pin in the gyroscope. I looked it up—it hasn't got a name. It's pin number 38-D, about two and a half inches—"

" Never mind that. Can the pins be repaired ?"

" No. They've been melted out of shape by an acetylene torch."

" Can they be replaced ?"

" Yes, sir. But, the parts aren't in stock and it'd take at least two weeks to manufacture them."

" How much oxygen did we lose ?"

There was a moment's hesitation before the voice replied slowly, " We have enough oxygen to last approximately one week."

Replacing the receiver, he relayed the message to the others. He hesitated, but there was no comment other than exchanged glances and grimaces. " That puts us in a bad situation," he said. " It would take two weeks to make the bombs operative again and there's only enough oxygen for a week. Originally we had enough oxygen to last two months, which allowed a margin of safety since our supply ship is due in a month. Now, the supply ship will arrive *after* we've run out of oxygen." He shrugged his shoulders and at the end of the gesture, they remained sagged as if the situation had become a physical weight. He minutely examined an aluminium paperweight as he toyed with it and admitted, " It looks as if we're a bunch of wingless ducks in a rain barrel."

The situation reminded him of how Mary had reacted a long time ago when she learned he *didn't want* to go to Korea. She had been very young then and thought all soldiers wanted

to fight for their country although some might not want to die for it. He had disillusioned her and explained curtly, " Mary, don't be silly. What man wants to go someplace where he might get his head shot off? I'll tell you. There's two kinds of men like that . . . *liars* and *fools* ! "

He smiled at the memory. Mary had changed considerably during those years of his absence and now she would probably faint if she knew where he was.

" Isn't there some way to contact Earth so the supply ship will arrive within a week ?" someone asked.

" There is *no* way," Hughes assured him. " We don't have a radio."

" Isn't there some way to contact them with flashes of light or something ?" ..

Hughes chuckled. " We do have a fair stock of small flashlights."

" Well, can't we—"

" Across two hundred and forty thousand miles ?"

Sheldon rose to his feet, his face getting redder by the minute. " Will someone please explain why Fort Lunar isn't equipped with a radio ? It seems to me that would be the most *important*—" He hesitated and looked challengingly from face to face.

" Our government concentrated on building one-way spaceships," Hughes explained. " It was costlier but faster than waiting for various problems to be worked out ; and the race to the moon was important." He held a hand before him and counted on his fingers. " The first ship brought materials for ten rocket launching stations, their crews and supplies, two hundred bombs and ten half-tracks. That was the most important : to establish launching stations. The second ship was larger and brought the equipment for Fort Lunar, its staff and their supplies, equipment for twelve mines, men to operate the mines, their supplies and more bombs. There wasn't room on either ship for our radio—which is bigger than you'd imagine—or our oxygen-rejuvenating system, which is half the size of Fort Lunar.

" Those items, together with more bombs and other equipment will be on the next ship."

Sheldon opened his mouth once more but Hughes waved a restraining hand. " Even if we did manage to contact Earth, it wouldn't do any good. It will take that ship a month to get

here, working at *maximum* speed. Don't forget, this whole operation has top priority and everything about it is being rushed as much as possible."

Sheldon sat down and lit a cigarette with surprisingly steady fingers.

" So, that leaves only one alternative," Hughes continued, " which is purely defensive. As I said before, we have to decide how to detect other espionage agents."

He turned to face Lapasnick, the only psychiatrist on the moon. " How in hell could spies possibly get past the screening we had ?"

Lapasnick did not inspire confidence as a psychiatrist. Afflicted with a physical ailment that made his eyes blink and a corner of his mouth twitch incessantly, he looked more like a prospective patient. He glanced self-consciously at the other men as he responded, " Ordinarily no foreign agent would get past our screening tests. But, this isn't a normal situation. Control of the moon means control of the Earth, and a government could afford to spend millions to train a few spies. It's the old story that you can do anything if you've got the money."

" How could any amount of money make a spy our secret service couldn't detect under ordinary circumstances ?"

" This is merely a theory, Colonel. But . . . a government willing to spend millions on a few agents who might eventually net them world control could select certain men in the United States—" He waved a hand vaguely. "—like Crisconi. They wouldn't contact such a man openly, but could surround him with competent psychologists in positions where they'd be near him frequently. Positions such as school teacher, neighbour, friend, employer and blood relative. Agents in such positions could, over a period of years, by methodical application, develop a man's character into any desired form. They could mould his personality by creating thousands of minor and major incidents, making suggestions, implanting propaganda in his mind, emphasizing certain facts, nullifying others and exposing him to selected influences and situations. In such a way, a person's character could be shaped so he wouldn't be unloyal when he took the screening tests, but would later develop into a traitor *when confronted with certain conditions that activated implanted thinking processes.*"

" Certain conditions such as being on the moon ?"

" Exactly."

" That's fantastic " Sheldon jeered. " Such an operation would take a lifetime."

" Our enemy could have used a lifetime," the psychiatrist retorted. " It was known more than thirty years ago that we'd reach the moon first. Our enemy could have selected intelligent *children* and moulded their characters until they were adults. And actually, foreign agents in the United States could have trained their own children !"

" Can you think of any other way that spies could have got past the screening ?"

" I haven't thought of any other method so far."

" Assuming your theory is correct," Hughes inquired, "how can we detect such agents ?"

The psychiatrist smiled apologetically. " Sir, without encephalographic equipment it would take days to analyze one man."

Hughes shrugged his shoulders with an air of finality. " Since the Eastern Federation plans to gain control of the moon and is making good progress, we must booby-trap every installation."

When the maps were spread on the desk, he studied them intently and said, "Major Rodowicz, you'll be in charge of this operation. All bombs are to be booby-trapped with as many variations as possible. We have three hundred." He paused to light a cigarette while his eyes remained focussed on a map. " Plant one in each of the launching stations, one in each mine shaft ; put one in each of these locations—" He produced a red pencil and muttered as he marked the map, "Mare Imbrium, Mare Serenitatis, Grimaldi, Copernicus, Caucasus, Kepler, Eratosthenes, Appennines and Tycho. Scatter the rest on the other side of the moon." He drew another map before him and made rapid marks.

Major Rodowicz's thin face was puzzled. " But sir, planting bombs on the other side where the enemy probably won't explore until after—"

" That's my order," Hughes replied coldly. " Put all personnel on it immediately, except Sergeant Hendricks. Tell him to find a soft chair and keep an eye glued to the telescope. If the Eastern Federation is on its way, there isn't much we can do—but it'll be nice to know when they arrive. Sheldon and Lapasnick, will you remain here, please ?"

When the room had cleared, he informed the two remaining men, " I'm going to give each of you an interesting problem I thought of. Your records show you both have a good knowledge of math, and I'm hoping you'll both arrive at the same answer. There's a possibility that one of you is a spy. If one answer differs from two identical others, I'll kill the man who submitted it, slowly and painfully.

" That might seem harsh but you'll understand when you read the problem." He reached into a drawer and produced two envelopes. " In each envelope is all the data and a written explanation of the problem. You'll work here, one on either side of the room."

He held out the envelopes. After a slight hesitation, each man accepted one and went to chairs on opposite sides of the room.

Sheldon ripped open the envelope, glanced at the contents and spun in his chair to stare unbelievingly at the colonel. When he saw the other's expression, he slowly turned around and began working on the problem. Lapasnick's shoulders sagged visibly when he read the notes but he started on the calculations immediately.

When the room was quiet except for the faint whisper of pencils on paper, Hughes drew the drapes that covered the only window in Fort Lunar. Through the polarized glass, he watched the seemingly endless plain bathed in two hundred and fifty degrees of glaring light as three half-tracks crawled into view. They gathered speed and suddenly sped across the desert, leaving behind twisting clouds of pumice that rose hundreds of feet in the light gravity.

The half-track was the oddest vehicle he had ever seen : eighteen feet long, seven feet wide and twelve feet high. Because of the light gravity on the moon, its engine was small and compact while the greater part of its bulk was in the reinforced top that covered its entire length. The top-heavy construction that was a protection against meteors frequently caused the vehicles to turn upside down when climbing a steep cliff and they had quite naturally earned the name " tumblebugs."

He was often envious of the " tumble-bug " drivers who sped across the moon's surface and sometimes found himself wishing he could exchange places with one. Although the drivers had their problems, they were relatively simple, and the lives of many men did not depend upon their decisions.

When Sheldon and Lapasnick finished the calculations, he collected the papers and studied the answers carefully.

" Congratulations, gentlemen. I calculated the problem myself and all three solutions agree for the most part. Mine was slightly different but that's probably because I'm an inferior mathematician." He grinned and the others seemed to relax.

He glanced at his watch. " We don't have too long."

The phone erupted and he snatched it before it completed the first ring. " Sir, I just spotted an Eastern Federation ship. It'll reach the moon in about an hour."

" Are you sure it's an enemy ship ?"

" Yes, sir. I know all the basic designs of our ships and—"

" How come you didn't spot it before this ?"

" Well, sir, this telescope isn't very strong and it came toward the moon from—"

" I understand. Will you report to my office for further orders ?"

When Hendricks arrived, he was surprised to find that the " further orders " were, " Have a seat."

Hughes opened a desk drawer and removed a bottle and glasses. " This occasion calls for a celebration, gentlemen. I have just the thing—top secret nerve medicine for commanding officers. It was given to me in strictest confidence but I don't suppose anyone will mind if we all use it to steady our nerves."

They all drank thirstily. The liquor formed a comfortable warmness in Hughes' stomach and after several drinks he felt some of the tenseness leave his body. As a precaution, he removed his automatic from its holster and placed it on the desk where it would be easier to reach if he became *too* relaxed.

Before long he had enough dutch courage to push the button that connected his intercom with every phone and loudspeaker on the moon. " Men, this is Colonel Hughes. I don't know how to say this in a gentle way, so I'll tell you bluntly. We have approximately one hour to live. Sorry it had to end this way—it's been a pleasure working with you."

He hung up the phone reluctantly and cursed beneath his breath. Telling men they were going to die was a dirty job and there seemed to be no *right* way to do it.

Hendricks glanced at his watch and asked unbelievingly, " We're going to die at seven-forty ?"

Hughes nodded and couldn't resist smiling at the thought. He had no suicidal impulses but death would be a release from all responsibilities. He had reached a ripe age and after a full life he would die quickly with a minimum of pain instead of dying by degrees of senility. More than that, he realized with pride that he had fulfilled his job in such a way that he would be immortal. His name would be in the history books and whenever anyone looked at the skies for the rest of eternity they would think of *him* . . .

Taking a generous drink from his tumbler, Hendricks coughed and inquired, " Sir, do you mind telling me *how* we're going to go out ?"

" The truth is," Hughes replied slowly, " we're going to blow up the moon. Don't look at me like I'm crazy . . . there's three hundred atomic bombs out there . . . each more powerful than any ever before made. In my desk is an electronic device tuned to every bomb. It's a simple gadget, but when I press the button, all the bombs will explode simultaneously at their various locations. The shock will be too much for this ancient, brittle hunk of rock. It'll break into a million pieces."

Hendricks gestured to show his bewilderment. " Why destroy the moon ?"

" If we're going to lose control," Hughes answered, " we should keep the Eastern Federation from gaining control. A short time from now, there will be nothing left of the moon but a lot of small, useless rocks."

He pointed toward a globe of the Earth on his desk. " Another reason is that, although most of the moon will be hurled toward outer space or form an orbit around Earth, a good portion will be thrown *toward* Earth. The smaller fragments will be burned up when they pass through the atmosphere but the larger ones will get through.

" I gave Sheldon and Lapasnick the mathematical problem of calculating at what time the moon should be exploded in order for those fragments to strike a particular location . . . namely, the Eastern Federation."

He spun the globe and stopped it by slapping it sharply with the palm of a hand. " A mass of rock half a mile in diameter weighs more than 10,000,000 tons. The moon's diameter is 2,160 miles so you might partly imagine what we're

going to throw at our enemy. Most of that mass will strike the eastern hemisphere. The fringes of the bombardment will be as far east as Germany, as far west as Japan and the Pacific Ocean, as far south as Australia and Africa and as far north as the Arctic Ocean.

" A lot of innocent people will be killed but the majority of casualties will be numbers of the Eastern Federation and the blow should cripple them so much that a global atomic war will be prevented. In the end, our action should save more lives than it takes. Do you understand ?"

" I propose a toast to Colonel Hughes and his ingenuity," Sheldon said shakily as he rose to his feet.

They raised their glasses and drank—with the exception of Sheldon. He slowly raised the tumbler to his face, then carried it farther back and hurled it.

Hughes ducked, but too late. The glass grazed the side of his head and knocked him backward.

Moving with the incredible speed of a man fighting for his life, Sheldon crossed the distance to the desk, grabbed the automatic and yanked open a desk drawer. Giggling insanely at the fantastic luck of finding what he wanted on the first try, he placed the electronic device on the desk and stepped back.

" You're not going to kill me, Colonel. I'd rather live with the hope of becoming a prisoner of war. *I don't want to die* !" As he spoke, his finger jerked spasmodically at the trigger.

Bullets struck the metal box and the group stared at the maze of broken tubes, wiring and tiny mechanisms.

Hughes rose to his feet and rubbed the bruise on his forehead. " I was ready for something like that," he said with a weak grin, " I pushed that button an hour ago. The electronic impulse has already reached the bombs and activated timing units. There's nothing anyone can do now."

Removing the eagle emblems from his shoulders, he found the two metal stars and fastened them in their place. For the first time in his career, he felt as if he had earned a promotion.

**—Richard R. Smith**

*The plants flew and had a thirst that made them deadly !*

# MOTHS

## by CHARLES L. FONTENAY

Only the broad wing surfaces of the ground-to-space rocket prevented its sinking from sight in the steaming mud of Venus. It lay half buried, like a crippled bird, in the eerie red glow that filled the entire atmosphere without casting any real light on the flat mud plain.

From the roiling, red-lit clouds that hung low over the whole sky, thousands of dark blots dropped like falling leaves. Those that came close to the wrecked rocket veered to converge on it. They struck its metal sides flat, with a dry flapping sound, and clung tenaciously.

Inside the rocket's thick hull, Jonner and Rikk hauled Meegl, the astrogator, by his heels from the wreckage of the radio equipment, where the crash had plunged him. He blinked up at them dazedly as Jonner, captain of the spaceship *Adonis*, dabbed iodine at the cuts on his swarthy face.

" By Saturn, Meegl, did you have to dive into the radio ?" asked Jonner indignantly after he assured himself the broken safety belt had saved Meegl from serious injury. " How do we call Venusberg now ?"

" We don't," said Rikk, the ground-space rocket's pilot. He was standing over the smashed equipment. " It looks like Humpty Dumpty after the fall."

" You mean we're not at Venusberg ? Where are we ?" demanded Loid Wils. He was a pudgy, red-faced businessman, one of two passengers the *Adonis* had brought from Earth to Venus.

" I think I know where we are," said Rikk, turning back to them. " I'm sure of the direction, because we were on course. We're somewhere between ten and twenty miles away from the city."

" Confound it, what sort of piloting is that ?" exclaimed Wils.

Meegl was getting to his feet, helped by Jonner and Nella Gregry, the fifth person in the rocket's cramped confines. Nella was the other passenger, serving as the *Adonis*' doctor-psychologist—an innovation of which the veteran Jonner did not particularly approve, but now required by the Space Control Commission for all ships carrying passengers. The presence of Loid Wils—and Nella herself, for that matter—on this Earth-Venus run had made blonde, lovely Nella a temporary crew member.

" What happened, Rikk ?" asked Jonner, turning to the pilot. En route from the now orbiting *Adonis* to the surface of Venus, the ground-to-space rocket had plunged suddenly to grief, and there had been no time for questions.

" Ailerons went haywire," Rikk explained. " She just dived. We're lucky we didn't hit directly nose-first and end up *under* this mud."

" Well, what do we do now ? Can you take her up again ?"

Rikk went to the control seat and peered out the thick windshield of the craft. He fiddled with the controls, swearing under his breath. After a moment, the windshield wipers began working slowly and jerkily pushing aside part of the leathery, greenish thing that covered most of the glass.

The searchlights were under the wings, buried in the mud, but Rikk held a flashlight against the heavy plasti-glass, moving its beam up and down outside. The thing that clung to them shifted at once, flopping over the windshield and smothering the wipers this time. But Rikk had found out what he needed to know.

" Can't risk it," he said, switching off the flashlight and swinging around in the control chair to face the others. "She's headed down at an angle and the leading edges of the wings are under the mud. The rockets would just drive us deeper."

" How about the searchlights ?" suggested Jonner. " If we could dig them out, could we signal with them ?"

" They could be seen at that distance," answered Rikk slowly. " The city blacks out at night because of the moths. But, in this misty air, I think they'd be too dim to attract attention unless the people there knew we were down. About the only thing we'd attract with them at twenty miles would be every moth in the country—which is just what we don't want."

" I guess we do one of two things, then," said Meegl, rubbing his lacerated face gingerly. " We walk to Venusberg, or we wait for them to find us."

" Looks that way," agreed Jonner. " Which is it, Rikk?"

Rikk stared thoughtfully at the windshield. Thick veins could be seen faintly in the green thing beyond the glass.

" I don't like leither one," he said. " But waiting for rescue is out, anyhow, I'm afraid. We never did get a radio message through all the static in those clouds, and Venusberg won't know we've left the *Adonis* until they clear and Qoqol can radio in."

" Qoqol doesn't know how lucky he is," said Jonner, thinking enviously of the Martian engineer relaxing in the comparatively spacious sphere of the spaceship. " Looks like we walk, then."

" The problem there," said Rikk slowly, " is those things."

He gestured toward the windshield.

" What are they?" asked Nella in an awed voice.

" Venus moths," he said. " If it were daytime, we wouldn't have to worry about them, because they stay above the clouds. But at night they come below for water."

" Water?" repeated Nella.

Rikk grinned wryly.

" I shouldn't have to remind you, Doctor, that the human body is more than eighty percent water," he said. " That's a bigger percentage than you'll find in that mud out there, and those things work on a percentage basis."

" I don't see why everyone here is so stupid," exclaimed Wils, thrusting himself forward. " The whole thing's very simple. We just wait here until daylight. Then we walk to Venusberg."

Rikk shook his head.

" We can't wait," he said. " This bus doesn't carry emergency food supplies, and the water supply won't last more than twenty-four hours for all five of us. You don't drink untreated water on Venus unless you want to die real quick."

" I should think that would be ample," said Wils impatiently.

Rikk looked at the pudgy man with a puzzled expression for a moment. Then he understood.

" You're not on Earth or Mars now, friend," he said. "The night here is twenty Earth-days long, and it's just started. Let's just all pray for rain."

Jonner's eyebrows lifted.

" When it rains," explained Rikk, " those moths fly, because they can get all the water they want in the air. The usual early evening rain is over now, but we can hope—and pray—for a good, all-night rain, because we've got a long walk ahead of us."

Meegl stepped down from the control chair and moved back toward the rear of the rocket. The other four were asleep in the cushioned chairs.

Meegl passed Jonner, his greying head bowed forward, and Wils, snoring loudly. He bent over Nella and kissed her softly on the lips. She murmured and moved, then opened her eyes.

" Hello, darling," she whispered.

" Fine honeymoon I'm giving you, *bonita*," he grumbled.

" Honeymoons come after marriage, darling. There'll be both when we get to Venusberg."

" *If* we get there. Help me wake the others, Nella. It's raining."

Sleepily, the five stirred around, getting awkwardly into their venusuits—tough, transparent, plastic coveralls with broad flat pads like oversized snowshoes attached to the feet. Their fishbowl helmets were fitted with airtight diaphragms so their wearers could speak to each other.

Rikk looked at the control board.

" A hundred and fifty degrees outside," he said. " It's a cool night. Set the thermostats on your venusuits to seventy degrees, everybody."

He broke open a rack, handed each of them a flashlight and took out two heat-guns.

" I wish we had more of these," he said, his helmet amplifier booming out in the close confines of the cabin. " Who's going to bring up the rear ?"

" You're the boss here," said Jonner. " You say it."

" Right. Meegl, then." Rikk handed one of the weapons to the astrogator, and strapped the other to his own venusuit. " We'll lead, Jonner."

They filed out through the airlock, one by one, and huddled in the mud. It was raining hard. There was no sign now of the flapping things.

With his flashlight, Rikk indicated the direction of Venusberg, a few degrees off the wrecked rocket's starboard bow, and they struck out. Rikk and Jonner took the lead, with Loid Wils close behind. Nella and Meegl brought up the rear.

The rain poured down around them, beating on their helmets with a muted mutter. Despite the heavy cloud cover, the night was not pitch dark. A faint glow spread over the sky from distant volcanoes—Venus was covered with them—and from diffusion of the vanished sun's light. The glow was not bright enough, however, to reveal the terrain.

As far as Jonner could see, there was no difference in this land and the desert highlands, except that this was mud instead of sand. There were no trees, no plants, no animals, just a bare sea of mud.

" How do these moths live ?" asked Jonner of Rikk. " The last time I was on Venus, they had decided no life was possible here because there isn't any free oxygen."

He could hear Rikk's chuckle through the amplifiers.

" They decided no water was possible, before the first expedition landed, too," Rikk answered. " Then they found it was in the lower fifteen percent of the atmosphere, just like it is on Earth, below the oxide smoke clouds. You'll realize there's life here, too, if you step into one of the giant yeast colonies in this mud."

" I've seen the moths. They're alive. But how, without oxygen ?"

" They're plants, Jonner. They're plants that have developed free flight so they can go above the clouds and get sunlight in the daytime. At night they come down for water and food from the mud. They're dangerous as hell, too."

" Even with venusuits ?"

" It looks like you'll find out," said Rikk, his voice suddenly harsh. " The rain's stopping !"

The patter on their plastic suits was, indeed, slowing down. Rikk stopped and turned to those behind him.

" Everybody spread out, quick !" he shouted. " Try to find a pool of free water—anything bigger than a puddle. Hurry !"

Five flashlights scattered, like fireflies, slowly, in five different directions.

" You're the boss here, Rikk," called Jonner across the fifty feet of mud that separated them, " but if we're in danger, shouldn't we head back to the rocket ?"

" Couldn't make it," Rikk shouted back. " We're half a mile away by now, and these moths drop like hawks. We've got to find water."

The rain stopped. The atmosphere seemed to clear at once, but it was not the open sky above them, only the red-lit clouds.

" Flashlights out !" bawled Rikk. " I'll keep yelling and everybody come in to me. If you run across water, holler."

The lights winked out. In the darkness, Jonner made his way toward Rikk, who was shouting, " Here ! Over here !" over and over again. After a few moments the pilot, tiring of the repeated words, broke into a bawdy space song that brought a grin to Jonner's lips.

Jonner reached Rikk first.

" I think we're gone ducks," rumbled Rikk, pausing between verses. " But if we'll get together we can make a show with the heat-guns."

He resumed his singing :

" *Martian Mabel was a grand old gal,*
*Had a robot husband and a spaceman pal . . .*"

Meegl came up to them.

" Nella ? Is Nella here yet ?" he asked anxiously.

" She'll be here," said Jonner. " Both of the others should be close by now."

" Nella !" shouted Meegl.

The sky suddenly darkened above them. A tremendous flat thing landed with a flop right in front of them. Rikk burned it with the heat-gun, never pausing in his singing.

Other moths were hitting the ground near them now, and they could see the hordes of them descending against the glowing clouds.

" Nella !" cried Meegl frantically. He turned to right and left, peering into the darkness.

" She'll be here, Meegl !" shouted Jonner, grasping him by the shoulder. " You can't find her !"

A scream like the cry of an agonized animal over-rode Rikk's song and stopped it. The shrill voice could not have been more than thirty feet from the three men. It rose, wailing, and was suddenly choked off.

Jonner couldn't tell if the screaming voice was that of a man or a woman.

" One down," said Rikk regretfully, and burst into song again.

" Nella !" cried Meegl in anguish. He struggled to break free of Jonner's restraining hold.

Jonner heard the splash, near them, as Rikk ended a verse. Rikk evidently heard it too. There was a moment of dead silence.

" Water ! Over here !" came an excited cry from the darkness.

Nella or Wils ? Jonner still couldn't tell.

The three stumbled to the pool, guided by shouts. It was about twenty feet from the spot where they had been standing. Climbing out of it when they got there was a muddy, suited figure.

As they approached, Jonner at last recognized the voice. Meegl recognized it simultaneously.

" Nella !" cried Meegl, running to her. " *Gracias a Dios* ! *Chiquita*, I was afraid . . ."

" Then it was Wils the moth got," said Rikk. " It's too bad the little guy had to die that way."

" Shouldn't we try to find him ?" suggested Jonner. " He may not be dead."

" He's dead, all right," said Rikk. " You wouldn't like to look at him, either. He'll be all shrivelled up—not a drop of water left in him. No, they'll just have to look for his body from Venusberg, when daylight comes."

" Now what ?" asked Meegl. He was sitting in the mud, his arm around Nella's shoulders.

" We stay here and pray for more rain," said Rikk. " As long as we're beside a good-sized pool, the moths will hit the pool instead of us. It's a hundred percent water. It's like standing close to a tree, but not under it, to keep from being struck by lightning—the tree draws the lightning."

As if to emphasize his words, one of the moths struck the water's surface near them with a muffled splash. Rikk killed it with a burst from his gun.

" We'll have to shoot them as they come down," he said. " If we don't, the first couple of dozen will have that pond dried up."

" Do you mean we're pinned here by this mudhole until it rains again ?" demanded Nella.

" I'm afraid so," said Rikk, " if we don't want to end up like Wils did."

" What do you do to get rid of moths that are really plants?" demanded Jonner morosely. " Spray them with weed killer ?"

Continued on page 112

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" What would you do if they were insects ?" countered Rikk. " Spray them with insecticide ? They're just too big and too many to handle, that's all."

The four of them sat on the bank of the pool, waiting. Every few minutes a moth splashed into the water from above them. Meegl and Rikk took turns shooting the creatures as they fell.

Once Rikk shone his flashlight beam briefly across the pond. It was choked with the bodies of the green flying creatures, some of them with a fifteen-foot wingspread.

Nella went to sleep, her head on Meegl's shoulder. Jonner felt himself dozing.

" *Por Dios* !" exclaimed Meegl softly. " We have no luck. The sky is clearing."

Jonner looked up. It was true. Stars shone faintly through the mist above them. The surface of Venus was getting one of its rare looks at the heavens.

" That kills the rain for a while," said Rikk phlegmatically. " Might as well get some sleep if you can, folks. I'll keep watch."

" The thing that blasts me," said Jonner, " is that that bright star up there is probably the *Adonis* swinging over us in orbit."

" That's Sirius," retorted Meegl gruffly. " The ship's on the other side of Venus right now."

The ground trembled beneath them. It shook again, harder. Nella awoke with a start. A distant, rumbling roar sounded in their ears. A smoky pall drifted across the newly-revealed heavens, replacing the clouds.

Brilliant light flared all around them as a new volcano exploded into being not more than three miles away. The ear-splitting thunder of the blast, arriving late, almost deafened them. The whole sky was lit with the flames.

" Now's our chance !" shouted Rikk, getting to his feet. " The moths will head for that. Let's get back to the rocket !"

" Why not go on to Venusberg ?" objected Jonner. " If the volcano attracts the moths, it'll draw them for miles."

" These new eruptions never last more than an hour," said Rikk. " Sometimes they're gone in a few minutes. I hate to go back, but that's our only chance."

The flashlights were no longer necessary. In the fiery light from the eruption, ashes beginning to fall all around them,

the four headed back toward the wrecked rocket as fast as they could waddle on the flat pads of their venusuits.

The four of them stood together at the windshield of the ground-to-space rocket and looked out. They watched the flames of the volcano flicker and die, leaving the mud-plains of Venus once more lit only by the reflection from the cloud cover.

" We have a fine kettle of guppies, *compadres*," said Meegl gloomily. " If we stay here, we die of thirst. If we leave, we get sucked dry by these animated plantain leaves."

The moths flew fast. Already they were beginning to flop against the sides of the rocket.

" That's Venus for you," said Rikk. " You live hard, you die easy."

" I don't suppose," said Jonner thoughtfully, " that we could hold them off long enough to do some work outside ?"

" How long did you plan to be out ?" asked Rikk.

" I don't know. It's just an idea I want to try."

" You might live twenty minutes out there. You might die as you stepped out the airlock. I wouldn't risk it, Jonner."

" We'll have to wait for another rain, then." Without realising it, Jonner was assuming command. " How tall a radio aerial do you have on this bucket, Rikk ?"

" She could be run up to seventy-five feet. Cities are far apart on Venus and we have to fly low to get under the clouds sometimes. But the radio's busted, Jonner."

" Is it a pretty sturdy affair ?"

" The aerial ?" Rikk smiled. " It'll almost hold you up. These things fly fast. It has to be sturdy."

" Good. We'll set up two-hour watches and get some sleep. The general directive to everybody on watch is, as soon as it starts to rain, sound the alarm."

Jonner himself took the first watch. Rikk followed him, then Nella.

Gradually the rift in the clouds closed. The clouds lowered over the rocket, the skies darkened.

At last, a gentle rain began to fall. Nella woke the others.

" A shower," said Rikk, looking out the windshield as he struggled into his venusuit. " Good for thirty minutes, I'd say."

" I hope that's long enough," said Jonner. " Get pliers and screwdrivers. Rikk, I hope you have spades in this thing."

" One. We don't normally figure on getting stuck in the mud."

" One will have to do, then. I hope one man can work fast enough to hold this mud back."

Leaving Nella inside, the three men went out again in their suits. Jonner led them to the leading edge of the right wing and, growling orders, seized the spade and began to dig. In ten minutes, he had uncovered one of the rocket's huge searchlights. Working quickly while Jonner shovelled mud away from them, Meegl and Rikk removed it from its brackets, clipping its connecting wires. Then they moved over to the left wing.

It was still raining, but not as hard, when the trio climbed on top of the rocket and attached the searchlights to the aerial, pointing upward. They connected them. Then they went back in through the airlock.

" Get your suit on, Nella," Jonner ordered. " Rikk, run up the aerial to full extension."

They complied. Jonner passed out the flashlights and handed one heat-gun to Rikk, retaining the other.

" All right," he said. " We're off to Venusberg."

" Jonner, are you crazy?" demanded Rikk. " That rain won't last more than ten minutes longer."

" Long enough to get us away from the rocket," Jonner said calmly. " This is where every moth in the countryside is going to be as long as the searchlights burn. Phototropism in either plants or insects is not a matter of will, but a physiological compulsion. For these Venus moths, light must be a stronger attraction than that of food and water, to make them go upstairs in the daytime and be attracted to volcanic fire."

" *Bonita*, it looks like we'll get a honeymoon instead of a funeral after all !" exclaimed Meegl, hugging Nella joyfully.

They went out through the airlock. They were about a hundred feet away from the rocket when the light rain slackened.

Jonner gestured behind them. The beams of the twin searchlights shot up into the sky like beacons, joining to make a circle on the low-hanging clouds.

As the rain stopped, the black blots were dropping again from the skies. But from all directions they were converging on the wrecked rocket, drawn by the glare of the searchlights —like moths.

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